



Sai Sumimori
Art by Ai Takahashi

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STRONGEST?





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Somebody somewhere had plotted to plunge the capital into a vortex of hell, but thanks to all the hard work of the Magical Girl of Justice, Immortal☆Char and her crew, those plans were reduced to ashes.

Amazing as always, my brilliant little sister. She's adorbs.

Apparently, there were some baddies trying to revive a Devil Lord or something. I'd let one of them get away but I managed to capture the other. However, due to a little hiccup, I still haven't been able to extract any information from him. That's basically the story up 'til now.

Oh well, I'm sure it'll work out one way or another. I'm not worried. Right now, I've got a bigger problem to deal with.

That's right.

I gotta get expelled from school ASAP so I can live my life as a shut-in!

Deep in the campus of the Royal Granfelt Specialized Academy of Magic, there stands a lonely old building.

In one room, a petite bespectacled teacher□Professor Tearietta Luseiannel□sits on her sofa, talking into a tabular barrier hovering in the air.

Her conversation partner is a young girl in a white mask.

'And so, unfortunately, we've yet to identify the mastermind behind "Bloodless Vier"□the insurrection in the capital.'

"Bloodless *what*?"

'But we will leave that to Shiva. I'm sure he's already identified the threats that are the "Devil Lord" and "devils," and is taking appropriate measures.'

"Uh... Right. Sure he is." The professor shoots me a sideways

glance.

Hey, don't look at me.

'We'll be focusing on the underground student council that's operating on campus. I would like to enlist your assistance, Professor Tear. Will you help us?'

"Huh? Oh, yeah, sure. Does that mean I'm now an official member of... What's it called, Beobachter?"

'We've settled on calling it Camelot. But as to your question, there are still a few members who oppose. I do apologize for my lack of power to persuade them... Which means I cannot reveal my identity either.'

"Eh, take your time. I can wait." Professor Tear laughs dryly.

I get the sense that she has an inkling of Little Miss White Mask's true identity.

In fact, I'm positive that anyone who's met or spoken with the individual would instantly recognize the masker's identity. After all, she radiates cuteness.

Just as I'm musing to myself...

'Charlotte? Are you in your room?'

A second voice chimes in through the communication barrier.

'Hwah?! M-Mother! J-Just a minute, please!'

Little Miss White Mask panics.

It's like watching a faceless YouTuber's identity accidentally get revealed.

The masked girl disappears from the screen and we hear muffled voices in the background.

Something about yummy pancakes being ready, followed by squeals of joy and jumping around. I can't help but smile.

Finally, Little Miss White Mask reappears. 'Eh-herm. Um... Did you hear any of that?'

"Not a thing..."

'Really? Oh, good! In any case, we'll continue this later. Ah! Before I go, I just want to tell you that an assistant of mine will be paying you a visit soon. Now if you'll excuse me!'

Click.

The transmission ends. Professor Tear turns to me with an anxious smirk on her face.

"I'll go ahead and say it. I figured out her identity. I mean, she's just too adorable! Please don't execute me!"

She's always so aloof and unperturbed but she sure makes it obvious when she's lost her cool. *So Professor Tear is onto Char, huh.*

By the way, I'm in Shiva Mode right now.

"While we're on the topic of true identities," the professor notes, "I've narrowed down yours to one candidate. That is to say, there's only one person I know of whom you could possibly be. But there's still one other puzzle piece I can't quite fit, so my guess is crude. I'm apprehensive to draw a firm conclusion."

Uh-huh. She's onto me, too.

Not that it's a problem. She seems like the type who'd keep quiet as long as the conditions are in her favor.

She continues, "In any case, unlike Char! whoops, I mean, your friend in the white mask, you seem to have deemed me useful. To get back to our conversation before we got interrupted by the call... A Devil Lord? And devils? Hahaha! What's this absurdity all of a sudden?!"

"Do you know what they are?"

“To cut to the chase, I know as much as anyone who knows about these things knows. Although my interpretation is different from theirs. As to what the truth is... Only those who know, know.”

“Makes sense... I guess?”

“Mythical historians will tell you that a Devil Lord is a ‘fallen’ god whose heart is ruled by death and destruction. But my interpretation is different.”

Professor Tear stands up and clears her throat.

“First of all, I do not believe in the existence of gods. The way I see it, the legendary beings during the mythical ages merely had mana levels far greater than the beings in the modern age. Of those, the benevolent ones were called ‘gods,’ and the ones who leaned towards malevolence were called ‘Devil Lords.’”

Personally, I don’t doubt the existence of gods because I had a conversation with a goddess-like being when I got reincarnated. But anyways.

“What about ‘devils’?”

“Generally, the term refers to the servants of a Devil Lord. These were beings who either spawned from a Devil Lord, or they were humans with the strength of a middle-class man of that era who made some sort of covenant with a Devil Lord. My interpretation of them is the same as the experts’. Anyway□”

Professor Tear points at the object I’m holding.

“□you’re saying that’s a devil?”

Cradled under my arm is the head of the devil guy I captured.

“Impressive,” she marvels. “It must take an astonishing level of vitality to remain alive without a body.”

“Um, no. He’s like this because of my magic. This guy’s supposed

to be a noble named Bar Agoss.”

“Bar Agoss? Hm. Haven’t heard of him. I have zero interest in the aristocracy. But a noble, you say? I see... So the devils are lurking among human high society—moving on. Tell me more about this magic of yours.”

She sure has a one-track mind.

“If you do as I ask, I’ll answer your questions eventually.”

“Aren’t you a genius at motivating people! Despite the vague time frame you offer like ‘eventually,’ I can feel my bosom swelling with excitement!”

She’s practically panting as she sings my praises. This does nothing for me.

“Not that I have much of a bosom!”

I wasn’t even going to say anything, but she went ahead and roasted herself.

“And?” she continues. “What do you want me to do?”

“Oh, right.”

I give Bar Agoss’s head a couple of light taps. All he does is mutter deliriously, “Kill me... Kill me...” with a dead fish gaze. Not much else.

“I want some information from this guy, but you see how he is. I’m hoping you could conduct his interrogation.”

“Why me? Do you take me for some sort of mad scientist who enjoys torturing people?”

“You seemed happy enough to inflict pain on Schneidel.”

Schneidel is an upperclassman who had a mental breakdown and dropped out of school.

He’d challenged me to a duel and, after some hubbub, I restrained him by putting a vice-style barrier on his injured shoulder.

He went crying to Professor Tear for help but instead got

molested by her in the guise of a magic lecture.

“Just because I didn’t go easy on him, it doesn’t mean I enjoy torturing people. Besides, you’re the one who put Schneidel in that situation. I’d say you’re the one who’s good at torture.”

“I can’t do it. It’s not my expertise.”

“You say that while you’re spinning Agoss’s head on the tip of your finger like a basketball. Look at the poor guy, he’s mortified.”

I’ll admit I’m treating him like an object right now. But I don’t enjoy torture and I’m not well-versed in it.

I know how to elicit fear, but I don’t really know where to go from there.

“All I want is information. You can do whatever you want with his body.”

Professor Tear’s eyes light up behind her glasses.

“Whatever I want? I’m free to dissect a devil?!”

Yeah, but don’t kill him right away. Be sure you get him to talk first.

“But all you have is his head? That’s a bit of a bummer.”

“I have the rest.”

I grab the remainder of his parts—arms, legs, torso and such—from mystery space-time and drop them on the floor. *Thunk, thunk, thunk!*

“Yeek!” Agoss shrieks.

“I placed some restrictions on the severed ends, but you’re welcome to cut open or close up any other area as you please.”

“Oh, yes! I’d love to. There’s no way to avoid the factor of pain when it comes to experimenting on a live specimen. I really don’t enjoy torture, I swear. But I’m sure he’ll cry and confess to everything.”

The purity in her smile is terrifying. It’s like she’s genuinely thinking, “*Whee! Research! Fun ♪*”

“That’s all,” I conclude. “I’ll stop by again soon to see how you’re

doing.”

“Right! Leave it to me. I can get started right now□”

Just as Professor Tear reaches for the head I’m still spinning on my finger...

Thud thud thud. We hear the footsteps of someone storming up the hallway.

Hastily, I hide Agoss’s body parts with optical camo barriers and pull up a surveillance barrier to see who it is... *Huh?* I lean my head to the side.

Wham! The door bursts open.

“Well, well, well. Here comes the puzzler,” observes the teacher.

“Waaaah! Save me, Professor Tear!”

It’s me.

More precisely, it’s my copy android. For the sake of convenience, we call him Haruto C. And for some reason, here he is, flailing into the room with tears in his eyes.

Aren’t “I” supposed to be in class right now?



Professor Tear shoots a glance at me (Shiva) and then towards my copy who’d just barged into the room.

“What’s the matter, Haruto?” she asks calmly.

My copy responds to her with a ludicrous demand:

“I’ll be honest with you. I hate school and I wanna quit. Please help me!”

Did he really just say that with a straight face? That’s top secret stuff I haven’t even revealed to Char!

Maybe something bad happened again? That's probably it. He's me, after all. And he came running to Professor Tear for help because he doesn't have anyone else. I'm ashamed of "myself."

"That isn't the kind of favor you ask of a teacher. If you want to quit, why not file an enrollment cancellation?"

"I wouldn't be here if I could do that!" Haruto C snaps at her and slumps back. Objectively, I look like a total jerk. "I just want to be a shut-in and spend my days lying around and doing nothing."

"Wow, you really are pathetic," sighs Professor Tear.

"And I don't know why, but the king himself wrote me a letter of recommendation."

"Oh, so now you're bragging?"

Haruto C doesn't seem to care that I'm standing right here. In fact, he's giving me glares every now and then as he theatrically tells the whole history of how I wound up at the academy, my ideal reclusive life, and even my plan to get expelled.

What's gotten into him?

"Uh-huh. I get the general idea, but I still don't think this is the kind of thing you come to a teacher for help."

"Please, I'm begging you!" He's desperate. Man, I look pathetic.

Hmm... Arms crossed, Professor Tear mulls this over while giving me a few glances.

Stop looking at me.

At that moment, we hear another set of footsteps running up the hall.

"I knew I'd find you here, Haruto Zenfis!"

A stunning blonde teacher with a monocle enters the room.

"Ugh! Belkam!" my copy groans.

“Bold way to address your teacher! But no matter. I don’t care what you call me. As long as you give me a thorough explanation of your views on sub-elements right now.”

Professor Oratoria Belkam grabs Haruto C by the sleeve.

“Wait!” he exclaims. “I’m supposed to be in class.”

“Which you just ran from.”

“I only ran because you tried to drag me out of the room!”

“What’s the point of you taking classes when your knowledge equals to or even exceeds that of a professor? Besides, I cleared it with your teacher, so you have nothing to worry about.”

“Why does this always happen on my days? It’s not even supposed to be my turn today!”

True. Today’s the Fifth Day. It’s usually my turn to be in school.

But I had some follow-up errands to tend to, and my copy is filling in for me.

□ *Oh. Now I remember.*

The last time I was on duty, Professor Belkam almost captured me. In the end, I convinced her to let me go by promising her, “Next time, I swear!” Looks like she finally nabbed “me” today.

Sorry. I’m the one who sowed that seed.

“I don’t know anything! Like I said, I’m feeling kinda crabby today!”

Belkam ignores Haruto C’s pleas as she drags him out of the room. He’ll probably try to go on strike again. I’m getting a stomachache just thinking about it.

“What do you think about that, Shiva?” Professor Tear probes.

“About what?”

“With Haruto’s powers, he should have no trouble freeing himself of Ora. But even though he desperately wanted to escape, he was seized rather easily. Don’t you find that strange?”

“He did say he’s having a crabby day.”

Haruto C is just a copy of my body and mind. His mana level is 0 and he doesn’t wield any handy-dandy Barrier magic like me. His functionalities are below that of the average human.

To top it off, Liza isn’t with him today. She had some kind of meeting with the Round Table. You could say all the cards were stacked against him.

“I see... This is exactly the puzzle I was referring to earlier. The existence of ‘crabby-day Haruto.’ I suppose you’ll explain at some point?”

If she’s got all that figured out, I guess there’s no point in hiding it any longer.

Should I follow Haruto C’s lead and let Professor Tear in on our plan to get expelled?

Sure, let’s do it.

The whole thing is becoming a huge drag. Professor Tear and I have totally different motives, but we’re like-minded in that we both have things we prioritize over political statuses and affairs.

My copy must’ve been thinking the same.

Pop! I take off my helmet.

“Blrff?!”

Professor Kiddy Glasses does a spit take.

“That’s right,” I announce. “Shiva’s identity is Haruto Zenfis.”

“Why’d you reveal your identity?! Help me solve the puzzle first!”
Somehow I’ve made her mad.

“Why are there two of you?!”

“The other guy is my copy. A doppelganger. I created his physical body with my Barrier magic. Then I implemented an artificial

intelligence-ish thing traced from my personality.”

“All I’m hearing are some complex ideas described with easy words. I demand you explain with logic!”

“I just sort of tried this ’n that until something worked.”

“So you created a flawless homunculus—an autonomous humanoid doll...purely on intuition? Seriously, are you some kind of god?”

I thought you don’t believe in gods.

“More importantly, Professor Tear—”

“Come o-o-on! Explain! Properly!”

“Like I said, I have no idea. Anyhow, I need your advice.”

“You want *another* favor? It’d be nice to receive some advance payment, in that case. Setting that aside, I don’t need a full explanation. I see what’s going on. Haruto’s copy, was it?”

“It’s Haruto C.”

“That’s the byname you distinguish him with? Well, aren’t you simple-minded.”

Professor Tear lets out a sigh before carrying on in her usual aloof tone. “In any case, I suppose the favor you want is what Haruto C mentioned—to get expelled ASAP?”

I’m glad you get me. I nod.

“Look, I know you don’t fit in the mold of this academy. Truthfully, I think it’d be a waste of your talents to remain in school.”

Great! This is moving right along!

“But there’s nothing you can do.”

“What? Why?!”

Professor Tear pensively crosses her arms.

“You’re truly ignorant about the things that don’t concern you directly, aren’t you? Although, I suppose I’m not one to talk.”

“Please explain what you mean, puriizu.”

All right, all right... Professor Tear holds up two fingers.

“Two reasons. First of all, you’re severely underestimating what it means to receive a letter of recommendation from the king. That man may be mediocre, but he’s no fool. Despite his declining power, he still has many supporters. The king’s voice is much more influential than you seem to believe.”

“Hmm. Which means...?”

“Even if you put on a flawless act and convince everyone that you’re utterly talentless, the teachers will harbor the hope that if they work patiently, diligently, and persistently to guide you, you’d eventually blossom. And if they do determine that you’re a hopeless case in spite of all such efforts, they’ll still make sure you won’t fail or flunk out. The school will find a way to graduate you within five years.”

“So... I was doomed from the get-go?”

Professor Tear nods firmly.

I slap my forehead. “That’s only one reason!”

“No, no. The second reason is the one that’s actually putting you in a bind. Let’s say that the king admitted he was wrong and withdrew his recommendation.”

“Oh! I never thought of that!”

All I gotta do is go over there and threaten him in Shiva Mode. I’ll fabricate some reasons to justify it.

“I wasn’t finished. You don’t want to cause problems for your parents... For Count Zenfis in particular, I presume.”

“If the king withdraws a recommendation he sent on his own accord, it shouldn’t matter, right?”

Professor Tear shakes her head.

“Didn’t I just tell you that he still has a lot of leverage? Moreover, Count Zenfis is the king’s strongest ally. How will it look if his son,

who was commended by the king, couldn't cut the mustard?"

"How?"

Professor Tear sighs dramatically.

Look, if I don't get it, I don't get it, okay?

"Count Zenfis will lose his power to unify the king's allies, which will create openings for enemy factions to take advantage. It may damage his reputation—which is relatively positive—among the general public. And even if the latter doesn't happen, your father's status in the aristocracy will definitely falter. And that's fatal."

"But why? Just because his son flunks out? Besides, I'm adopted. And everyone already knows I'm a total dud with a mana level of 2."

"That's precisely why. First, everyone will question why the king nominated such a dunce. They'll suspect that somehow Count Zenfis tricked the king into nominating you. In any case, that's how rivalries in the aristocracy work. The scummy thing about high society is that they don't target their enemies directly."

What a pain in the ass.

"Still, isn't it peculiar. Frankly, when I first heard that you were recommended by the king with a mana level of 2, I thought there must be some sort of conspiracy afoot. But when I opened the box and looked inside, I found a practitioner of Ancient Magic on par with the legendary mages of the mythical times."

Being flattered by her like this is making me antsy.

"What do you mean by conspiracy? Like, someone convinced the king to recommend a dud like me in order to engineer my dad's downfall?"

"Exactly. But on the other hand, I can't imagine the king wouldn't see through such a ruse. Like I said, that man's no fool. Which is why I suspected a ploy must've been brewing, and decided to test you and see for myself before school began," she confesses.

Although, at this point, it lost its shock value.

“Doesn’t that mean the king determined I *wasn’t* a dud? But I’ve never even met him.”

He’s actually my birth father, but practically nobody knows. Dad does, but he’s been extremely careful to make sure nobody finds out—especially the king.

“I can count on one hand the number of people who could possibly persuade the king. For this case, I can narrow them down to two. Did you ever use your powers in the presence of Princess Marianne or Prince Laius?”

My sister? And Laius?

Oh, yeah. Once when I was about ten. I beat up Laius, who was a total brat back then.

I’d understand him holding a grudge against me, but I doubt he’d send a recommendation.

Does that mean my sister is the one who put me in this dilemma? *Sigh...*

“Clearly, this rings a bell—but hey, no need to drop to all fours in despair. There’s still a way out.”

“What?!” I stand abruptly.

“Change the way you’re looking at it.”

“Change the way I’m looking at it, how?” I draw closer to Professor Tear.

She grimaces as she leans away.

I pull myself together and decide to use my own brain for a change.

My main goal is to get expelled ASAP. But according to Professor Tear, that’s practically impossible.

But wait. *Don’t lose sight of yourself, Haruto.*

What I *really* want is to be a shut-in.

As I'm reassessing my goal, I catch a glimpse of Professor Kiddy Glasses's deadpan stare.

Come to think of it, she only teaches one class a week and spends the rest of her time at the lab doing whatever she wants...

"Ooooh!" I yelp.

Honestly?! Seriously?!

"Now you're getting the picture."

Yeah, I got it.

If I can't escape from the curse of school...

"I can be a shut-in at school!"

"Exactly!"

Eureka! A godsent idea I never would've seen coming. A total forehead slapper□like Columbus's egg!

Professor Belkam said earlier, *"What's the point of you taking classes when your knowledge equals to or even exceeds that of a professor?"*

Maybe if I can convince everyone that I'm way beyond the academy's capacity, I can continue to enroll without having to show up for classes.

"But is that really possible?"

Deep down, I'm skeptical.



In front of Charlotte is a fluffy pancake, generously drizzled with honey.

Her eyes sparkle.

She gives it a stab with her fork and dips her knife in. A gentle

puff of steam rises, and the syrup oozes into the opening as if to seal the escaping warmth.

Nom!

She pops it into her mouth, and the sweetness of honey overtakes her taste buds. *Nom, nom!* As she chews, the cake's toothsome aroma folds and swirls together, doubling the yumminess.

"It's so sweet and warm ♪"

Bliss. Is there anything in the world comparable to this joy? Well, yeah... There are. But anyway, Charlotte wolfs down the heavenly treat.

"Goodness me. Mind your manners, Charlotte," scolds her mother, Natalia. Nonetheless, she can't help smiling.

There's nothing as wonderful as watching her child enjoy herself.

"By the way, Charlotte, what were you doing in your room just now? You were alone in there, but I thought I heard someone else's voice."

"Glrk?!"

Charlotte chokes on the pancake. *Whap, whap!* She smacks herself in the chest.

Flay, ever attentive, passes her a glass of milk.

Glub, glub, glub... Aah!

"Erm... You see, uuh..." Charlotte stammers.

The red-haired maid comes to the rescue. "It's only natural for a growing girl to have a secret or two. You may be her parent, Natalia, but you shouldn't pry."

Sometimes, Flay makes a good point.

"Tee-hee! Do excuse me. I was a bit curious, that's all," Natalia giggles.

"Um, um!" Char is flustered. "You see, I finish all my homework as instructed, and I exercise outside with Flay. I just want to try new

things in my free time...”

“I know you work hard. And I encourage you to use your spare time to do whatever you take interest in.”

Indeed, Charlotte completes all her lessons and homework perfectly every day.

Too perfectly. In fact, it's becoming a problem.

Natalia looks at her daughter, who gazes back at her worriedly.

“Are you enjoying your current lessons and studies?” she asks sweetly. “Is any of it hard or troubling?”

Hmm... The little girl wrinkles her brow. “It isn’t hard. But, um. It is a bit...boring.”

Just as I feared... Natalia sighs.

“Your tutors said the same thing—that they’re running out of things to teach you.”

Charlotte’s private teachers are the most elite scholars available. Some even have experience as imperial mages.

If someone like that is running out of things to teach, the girl’s education is bound to come to a dead end.

“You don’t have to tell me more than you want to, but what are you doing in your spare time?” the mother asks.

“Studying Ancient Magic!”

Natalia blinks, flummoxed by the girl’s cheerful declaration.

“Ancient Magic? Just like Haruto, then.”

She’s both surprised and thrilled.

Like most people, Natalia was skeptical about the use of Ancient Magic in modern times. But the Black Knight’s deeds have changed her perspective.

Her husband, Gold, speculates that the myriad of incomprehensible and highly advanced magic the mysterious warrior wields is indeed Ancient Magic.

On the other hand, since public opinion of the practice is low, there are virtually no opportunities to study it as a field.

There is one famous researcher at the Magic Academy...

The professor who runs the research lab Haruto belongs to.

“But I can’t expect a full-time teacher at the academy to come and serve as a tutor...”

Even if the professor does accept, Haruto would then lose his mentor.

“Mother?”

“Oh□I’m sorry. If you want to learn Ancient Magic from someone, I was thinking that Haruto’s teacher would be the best candidate. But it’d be a difficult ask.”

“You mean Professor Tear?”

“Is that her name? Oh, but...”

If she can’t ask the professor to come here...

“...perhaps you can study at the research center with Haruto,” Natalia thinks aloud.

“Can I?!” Charlotte latches on hard.

“They do allow accelerated enrollment for younger students. But I believe the youngest was thirteen...”

In fact, the record holder is none other than Tearietta Luseiannel herself. If Charlotte were to enroll next year at twelve years old, she’d set a new record.

“If it’s possible, I want to join Brother Haruto at the academy right away!”

“I don’t think they’ve ever allowed mid-year enrollment for students who are skipping grades...”

But for this girl, it might just be possible.

“Mid-year enrollment...” mumbles the girl.

I haven't thought of that!

A fiery ambition ignites in Charlotte's little heart.



My plan to get expelled ASAP has run aground.

Actually, it turns out my plan was impossible from the very start.
But setting that aside...

Thanks to Professor Tear's advice, I adopt a new strategy:

Operation: Be a Shut-in at the Academy! *Bam!*

A total contradiction in terms, but I won't dwell on it.

If the school deems it unnecessary for me to attend lectures or practical magic classes, I can live as a shut-in at school under the guise of pursuing my own research. At least, that's the idea.

Not a simple task, of course.

In fact, I'm worried it'll be harder than getting expelled.

“What's so hard about it, Sir Haruto? Making those teachers comply should be a breeze for you.” Liza plops down on the floor and tilts her head inquisitively.

I called her and Haruto C into my dorm room for a meeting. I didn't invite Charlotte and Flay because something tells me they'd just complicate matters.

“As far as the lectures go, my knowledge is limited.”

Thanks to the private lessons I took alongside Char—which I barely kept up with—my comprehension in magic isn't bad. Albeit only on specific topics. Sooner or later, I'll hit a wall and the jig will be up.

What I'm even more skeptical about are the practical magic

classes.

The public believes I only have an affinity to Earth magic. Because of that, I'll be severely restricted. This is going to require some very careful attention.

"Once people know what you're capable of, Sir Haruto, they'll realize there's nothing for you to learn at the academy. Your best option would be to aim for early graduation. That'd be the easiest."

A very enticing idea... But isn't that asking way too much? Besides□

"I don't want to stand out."

I've gotten good at bluffing with my Barrier magic, and even with the limitations of Earth magic, I can probably still manage... But then people might start to suspect, "Haruto = Shiva."

In fact, Professor Tear practically had the same idea.

Even if that were to happen, I've got Haruto C's existence to remove all suspicions. But even a doppelganger won't be enough if the public finds out I can use all kinds of wacky magic.

"Which means I'll have to find the sweet spot between exhibiting a high level of magical skill, but not as high as Shiva's."

Haruto C flashes an evil grin.

"Sounds impossible."

"Yup."

I'm incapable of executing tasks that require such subtle precision.

"Setting aside the practical magic classes, what about the lectures?" Haruto C asks.

"We really can't afford to set that aside. But, yeah, let's do so for now. I signed up for the hardest, most advanced lecture classes in the kingdom's toughest academy. It won't be easy to get perfect grades in all of them. Let's resolve this first."

Haruto C and I cross our arms and ponder. *Hmm...*

Ding! Our lightbulbs flick on simultaneously and we clap our hands.

“Did you figure it out, Haruto C?”

“Yeah, I didn’t even have to use my brain.”

“Yep. We don’t have to attend the lectures in the first place.”

We exchange a firm handshake.

“Um... Won’t you get in trouble if you suddenly start cutting classes?”

It’s only natural for Liza to be skeptical.

If I start blowing off all my classes after enrolling with a recommendation from the king, I’d basically be dragging my dad’s name through the mud.

“All they need to see are the results. That’s all.”

I smirk like a villain.

Our test scores determine our grades for the lecture courses. If I can manage to ace every exam, nobody will complain if I don’t show up to class.

I have a secret plan.

All I need is Professor Tear’s political influence—nope, I can’t count on her. I’ll need Polkos or Professor Belkam to help me dupe the other teachers.

“I see.” Liza looks relieved like she’s thinking, *Sir Haruto will handle everything just fine*. Little does she know she’s involved in our plan, too.

“Like I said earlier, my sphere of knowledge is really limited. There’s no way I can pull off perfect scores in every class. Also, studying is too much work. So...”

Haruto C and I swoop down on Liza.

“Huh, what? Uh...”

“We can’t do this without Professor Tear’s and your help!”

“Me? What do you want me to do?”

Haruto C and I answer in unison:

““Help us cheat!””

I’ll send the test questions to Liza and Professor Tear who will be on standby somewhere off-site. Then they’ll feed me the answers through a communication barrier. To be extra safe, I ought to get a hold of the questions in advance (through illegal means, of course).

With both of their brains on my side, I have nothing to fear!

“Wha...”

Liza looks undeniably upset. She’s not much of a rule-breaker.

So in order to motivate her...

I bring her with me to pay Professor Tear a visit.

“Sure. I’ll help.”

Wow, really?

I mean, I figured she’d be interested, but... *Not exactly an upstanding educator.*

“Admittedly, I’ll be taking a risk. However, it pales in comparison to the potential benefits.”

“Benefits?”

Considering the amount of favors I’ve been asking of her lately, I should brace myself for a crazy demand.

“Once you don’t have to go to classes anymore, where do you intend to be a shut-in?”

“My dorm room.”

I’ll have Haruto C cover for me while I laze about in my log cabin back at the count’s fief.

“Simply claiming that ‘the classes are too easy’ is a weak excuse for skipping out. It’d be more convincing if you say that you ‘have more important things to do.’”

“Other things? Oh... Like researching magic?”

“Exactly! In which case, it won’t be very believable if you stay in your dorm room.”

“Seems fine to me.”

“It’s not!”

Well, jeez. She doesn’t have to get so worked up.

If I don’t leave Haruto C in my dorm room, how am I supposed to chill out back at home?

“Look, think about it,” the professor explains. “There’s a place that meets all the requirements. Loads of materials related to Ancient Magic, plenty of equipment, and access to the leading researcher in the field.”

Fine. I get it.

“You want me to hang out with you.”

“No, that’s not it! Although technically, it is!”

What is it exactly, then?

“Look, you’re a valuable subject for my research. I’m not asking you to hang out with me or anything, but... Let’s do Ancient Magic research together!”

Oh, that’s what it is.

Research *subject*, though? She didn’t have to say it like that.

“I won’t dissect you or anything! Although, if you’re willing, that’d be great.”

See, this is why you don’t have any other friends.

“I’ll clear out a room for you. You can make yourself comfortable. Treat it like your own home.”

“Yeah, but...”

I look around the messy room. It's *really* messy. So much so that I can't think of any other word to describe it.

But I guess if she's going to give me my own space, that won't matter.

And if I renovate it to suit my taste, Haruto C won't complain. I can set up a door between here and the count's fief for easy travel in case anything comes up.

Tap tap. Someone's poking me from behind.

Liza's staring at me intently. Sensing she wants to speak to me privately, I lean in to offer my ear.

"Living here with her is dangerous. She'll learn too much."

The truth is, Professor Tear already knows a lot because I told her. Like the fact that I'm Shiva.

But I haven't told Liza and the others about it yet.

They still don't accept Professor Tear as an official member of the Round Table, so I'm not comfortable telling them that I went ahead and spilled the beans.

I'm just waiting for the right moment. I'm procrastinating.

"It's a good opportunity to figure out whether we can truly trust her," I justify to Liza.

"Oh, of course. I should've known you'd already thought it through, Sir Haruto."

Her unsuspecting smile is pummeling my heart with waves of guilt... *Ouch.*

Meanwhile, Professor Tear side-eyes me as if to say, *You still haven't told them?* All in good time, all in good time.

Anywayz.

The means to acing my test have been acquired. Which will rightfully allow me to ditch more than half my classes.

The remaining issue is the one I've been avoiding thinking

about the practical magic classes.

What can I do to legitimately drop those, too?

My internal flame burns as I search for a solution...

“Perhaps you’re investing all your efforts in the wrong direction, Haruto,” comments Professor Tear.

Your input is greatly (not) appreciated.



I just came up with a brilliant idea.

It’s not a death flag, I swear.

I stayed up late last night contemplating, hoping to figure something out in time for my practical magic classes the following day. Then I fell asleep. But the second I woke up, the answer came to me.

As they say, you can’t have good ideas without a good night’s sleep.

And here we are: Shooting Magic (Precision Level) class.

It’s a tough course demanding high-level accuracy and force to shoot faraway targets.

On the first day of class, I tried to act like a total doofus. But unfortunately, some crow-like bird got in my way. I launched a wimpy pebble attack and was able to miss my target by a mile, but my ability to manipulate the rock’s course mid-air scored a lot of points.

I’m still miffed about that.

Since then, I’ve been careful not to make the same mistake by half-assing the lessons. But not today.

Today, I have a plan.

Ta-da! I whip out my magic gun.

“Ooh! Is that the magic shooting instrument I’ve been hearing about? Why did you decide to bring it today?” The elderly teacher eyes the magical weapon with interest.

Usually, I leave it with my copy, Haruto C. I’ve never brought it to class before.

“Well, lately I’ve been feeling like I’m hitting a wall due to my limited capacity for magic...”

I wrinkle my brow, trying to look apprehensive.

“Oh, no, no, no. Your magic possesses rare qualities such as the ability to manipulate objects from a long distance. With some training in force and accuracy—just what this class is for—you’ll improve in no time.”

“Oh, no, no, no. My mana level is only a 2. No matter what I do, it’s no use.”

“Oh, no, no, no! There’s no need to be so hard on yourself. You’re still young. You have plenty of potential!”

“Oh, no, no, no! The max mana level we’re born with isn’t something that can be changed. No amount of effort will ever bend the laws of nature.”

We go back and forth with the oh-no-no-nos.

“Anyway!” I argue. “This is a secret family treasure that has been passed down the Zenfis lineage. With this, I think I’ll be able to keep up in class despite my mana level of 2.”

I force an end to the conversation and wave the magic gun in the air confidently.

Hehehe. This is the brilliant plan I came up with after a good night’s sleep.

Operation: I’m not impressive, but I do have an impressive tool which

makes me impressive!

I'll demonstrate powers so amazing that I won't need to be in class. But it's my magical tool that'll take all the credit, not me. And I'm the only one who can use said special gadget (or so I'll claim). Based on that, I'll be able to convince the teachers that this makes me special enough to be exempt from class.

Just as I'm getting ready to show off my magic gun's performance...

"Ah!" I hear a voice. "So that's the magic instrument I've been hearing rumors about. But I didn't know the Zenfis family owned such an heirloom."

A clean-cut young man with long blond hair steps forward. *Who's this guy?*

"We've never spoken before. I'm Alexei Guberg. I'm a fourth-year. Pleased to meet you."

His lips are smiling, but his eyes aren't. I don't recognize this handsome, fake-grinning face (I probably have seen him, I just don't remember), but his deep manly voice sure rings a bell.

It's the "1" guy!

The dude who seemed to exert the most authority in Numbers—the shady student group in full-face headdresses.

He's a good-looking guy with a pleasant, yet intense demeanor. I'll bet he's popular with the ladies. Too bad he's the hoity-toity leader of some dumb club.

It turned out that Numbers wasn't directly involved in the insurrection at the capital—they were used as pawns for the lead-up, though.

I judged that they're nothing more than a silly little afterschool club. Level of danger: zero. But Char still seems interested in investigating them.

“May I have a look at that magic tool?”

“Oh, sure. Here.”

Alexei-senpai AKA Number 1 takes my magic gun. He looks at it with fascination from top to bottom, side to side.

“Hmm. So, you pull this lever in with your finger, and a magic missile shoots out of this tube?” The second he mumbles that□

“Guberg! What on earth are you doing?!”

The old-man teacher leaps to stop him but it's too late. The blond boy aims the gun at me and pulls the trigger.

Silence.

Nothing happens.

Well, duh. Only Haruto C and I can operate it.

“I suppose there's a trick to using it?” Alexei-senpai asks apathetically. No sign of remorse.

“Only I can operate it. It's bound by a covenant to me.”

“Oh-ho? It requires a covenant to wield? Why, that sounds like one of the ‘seven sublime weapons.’” He gives me one of those suggestive smirks.

“Heh heh heh...” I give him one back.

Mirroring is a good technique if you don't know what to do in a social situation□something I learned from the internet during my previous life.

“The very idea!” the elderly teacher interrupts. “The seven sublime weapons are treasures not just of the kingdom, but of the world! Forgive me for my language, but to hand one to a student would be absurd.”

Alexei counters, “But of the seven, two are merely the stuff of

legend. No one even knows what they look like. They could be anywhere without our realizing it, could they not? Besides, doesn't it seem odd that Haruto neither confirmed nor denied my suggestion?"

Hmm. The old-man teacher ponders.

Is this conversation heading in a good direction or a bad direction? Probably in a good direction. I trust the common wisdom of the internet.

"I would love to see the powers of this magic device. What do you say, Haruto? Will you duel with me?"

"Huh? But this isn't a one-on-one combat class..."

"Of course, we won't do anything to hurt each other. Just for fun, you know. It's not like we're betting on anything."

If there are no stakes, I guess it's fine... is my first thought. But let me rethink.

I don't know much about this guy. However, I get the impression that he's highly skilled. At the same time, he's serious enough about his studies to attend his classes. What will everyone think if I demonstrate that I'm only marginally above his skill level?

"Oh, so you think you're too good to show up to class? Number 1 diligently comes to his classes. Gee, you must think you're a real aristo!"
(Accompanied by derisive sneering, dripping with sarcasm.)

Actually, yes. I am an aristocrat. In fact, I'm a prince.

I can't imagine this scenario going in a direction that'll help me bail out of studies.

Better to steer it towards one where I can strut my magic gun's strength without anyone to compare against, and then declare, *"I don't need to take this class. Just give me the credits, please! (heart emoji)"*

Okay, I'm declining.

I'll throw in an excuse about my grandmother's dying wish or religious reasons or whatever.

“I’m so sorry, but...”

“Do it, Haruto! This is a chance to show everyone what you can really do!” Laius butts in. “H-Hey, man. Why are you glaring at me?”

I’m giving you the “Stay out of this!” look.

The other students jump in to egg me on, too.

Great. At this point, I don’t see any way of avoiding it.

So it goes...

Unfortunately, I have to fight a duel now.

Alexei announces, “Allow me to explain the rules. Whoever shoots all five targets first wins.”

That’s a pretty simple rule. But the game is gonna be hard.

Not the part about hitting the targets.

My sole goal is to create a legitimate excuse for dropping this class. Which means I can’t just *win* this duel; I have to *crush* it!

There are five targets.

It’ll be over in a flash if I just hit all five targets simultaneously. But Alexei-senpai is the one who proposed the rule. There’s no way he’s not capable of destroying them all at once, too.

Which means we’ll only be seen as equals.

Think, Haruto!

There must be some loophole in the rule I can brilliantly exploit. What is it...? What...is... Zzz...

I doze off for a second. After all, I was up half the night.

But thanks to that micro-nap, I’ve got it!

I found the loophole.

Here’s the plan:

In addition to hitting all five targets at once, I’ll also shoot down Alexei-senpai’s attack with my magic *at the same time!*

The winner of this battle is whoever hits all five targets first.

If I do that *plus* sabotage his attack, I'd be "crushing it," right?

Yeah. Definitely crushing it.

Hehehe. You think you have this game in the bag, but just wait, Alexei-senpai. I chuckle dauntlessly.

He reciprocates with a composed smile.

Huh? Don't tell me... He's got the same idea?!

It's possible. In fact, that's gotta be it.

Based on his smile oozing with confidence and the fact that he's the leader or whatever of that shady group, he must be pretty sharp.

What now? What do I do?

As I'm frantically gathering my thoughts, the elderly teacher calls out, "Are you ready? When I raise my hand, you may begin!" He seems to have totally abandoned his lesson plan.

"Ready..."

He raises his wrinkly old hand.

"Start!"

Looks like Alexei-senpai had already started casting his spell. Five magic circles appear in front of him.

Don't fall for it!

Just because I can only see five, it doesn't mean there are only five. I'm a hundred percent sure that he's also prepared a magic spell to shoot mine down.

I aim my magic gun.

But I can't think of a way to counter his strategy.

What now? What now? I panic. At the same time, I conjure a ton of tiny invisible barriers and□

KA-BLAM-BLAM-BLAM-BLAM-BLAM-BLAM!!

I go into a rapid-fire blaze and annihilate *all* of the targets while

making it look like sparks are flying out of my gun barrel. I also go a little overboard and completely obliterate the dirt mound in the background.

Bwahahaha! How's that? I destroyed your targets too, senpai! On top of that, I wrecked his magic circles before he even had a chance to deploy his attacks.

I win, right? Don't I? According to the rules?

I look over desperately at the teacher.

“Hwaaaaa...”

The old man is trembling wide-eyed with his mouth hanging open. He can't seem to find his words.

Well then. I glance over at Alexei-senpai. Does he have any complaints?

“Whaa-a-a...”

Huh? He's gaping and quivering, too.

I turn around to see all the other students having the same reaction.

Does this mean I can be excused from the class? Or do I still have to take it? WHICH IS IT?

Nobody's answering my question, Charlotte!



The rest of the lesson was canceled because the elderly teacher never regained his senses.

He did pull himself together for a second. But when he saw me remorsefully fixing up the dirt mound that I'd just messed up (which only took a second by scooping up the soil with my barrier), he went back to his happy place. Why, though? All I did was move some dirt.

Maybe if I shock my teacher into a coma every period, I can get out of

class.

I shake off the evil thought and walk to my next practical magic lesson.

Magical Martial Arts (Master Class).

This is the one I absolutely have to drop.

Because this course focuses on hands-on close combat. The idea of having to trade punches with strangers is mortifying.

I'm not the kind of guy who engages with his fists—or with his words.

Unfortunately, I haven't come up with any good ideas.

The aim of this class is to master the art of weaponless combat using only self-fortification magic and the physical control achieved thereby.

Which means no magic guns.

Since I totally creamed Laius in a spar on the first day, it's too late to play the part of a useless softie. I've been kinda BS-ing my way through the course, but I can only keep that up for so long.

What now?

I decide to empty my mind and just go with the flow. In other words, escapism.

As per usual, Laius challenges me to a battle. And just like every time so far, his attack moves all miss. I just lazily dodge them.

“Zenfis, all you ever do is retreat. How about fighting back for a change?” The burly teacher in a form-fitting tank top advises me.

“I'm not really into hitting people...”

Which isn't a lie.

When I'm playing superhero, I chop people's heads off like it's no big thing. But fundamentally, I'm a gentle guy who can only hit someone in my fantasy.

“But you're okay with slamming your opponent to the ground?”

Then all you gotta do is follow that up with one good punch. Come on, you'll get used to it, I'm sure."

Professor Tank Top shows off his white teeth and flexes his biceps.

I really don't like it when he does that.

"Might be a psychological block. Well then, how about observing the other students as they engage in their intense battles?"

Tank Top flashes his pearly whites again.

While the rest of the students get sweaty from sparring with each other, I sit on the ground in the corner.

Technically, I'm being excused from participating in class. But not the way I want.

What I want is to curl up in my room. I don't want to sit here being treated like the mousy kid in gym class. Boo.

Since I don't have anything better to do, I follow the teacher's suggestion and watch my classmates spar with each other.

When Laius fought against the Elder Ghouls the other day, my impression was, "Is this the best a student can do?" Seems like that was accurate.

I'm totally able to follow their movements with my eyes. In terms of physical abilities, I'd probably be able to handle any of them just fine. Probably.

The reason I'm not confident is because of my lack of experience.

The training I did with my dad isn't a good frame of reference. He was going easy on me, but I don't know by how much.

And I pretty much never get physical when I do my superhero gigs. My Barrier magic is enough to manage everything. Plus, I don't wanna put myself in any danger.

Therefore, my experience in actual combat is essentially zero.

Huh? Wait a minute...

That's it! As it happens, I never actually do action scenes when I'm in Shiva Mode.

Which means...

Nobody knows Shiva's actual combat skills. In fact, I bet people suspect that he isn't too great a martial artist.

The only reason I'm holding back in the practical magic classes is because I don't want anyone to suspect I'm connected to Shiva. So even if I do get good marks in martial arts, it likely won't raise any suspicion.

All right. Let's go with that!

Set with determination, I rise to my feet.

"Sensei! I want to give it a try."

"Good. I like the look in your eyes! The look of a warrior. Your soul must've been moved by the sight of everyone's passion. And by my muscles!"

Professor Tank Top continues to flex his muscles and strike his macho poses. *Please stop.*

"Let's see... Who should we have you fight..."

The teacher starts eyeing the students.

Why not throw Laius under the bus? I think. But just then...

"Agh!"

Someone smacks into me.

So you're the human sacrifice. I get a good look at who I just caught in my arm—it's the White-Haired Ponytail Girl. Irisphilia, otherwise known as Iris.

And the opponent she was just fighting is...

"Hmph. Not bad for a commoner. But I'm afraid your cheap tricks won't work on me."

A platinum blond. A handsome one at that.

It's the fourth-year student Alexei something-or-other, also known

as Number 1.

He was pretty gentlemanly to me, but he's way more merciless towards Iris. Oh, right—that whole aristocratic supremacy thing.

"Sorry, Haruto. I'm all right now."

Iris, who was leaning on me, steps away. Her arms are hanging limply at her sides. Looks like she blocked a full-frontal attack with her hands and now they're too numb to move.

"Don't overwork yourself," says the upperclassman. "I was just looking for someone to spar with. I'll take him next."

Alexei's face grows stern.

Then, for no good reason, the rest of the class starts getting hyped up.

"Yeah! Another 'defend-the-lady's-honor' sitch!"

"Once again, it's time to step up as a man!"

"Get him!"

"You've got this, Haruto!"

"A battle against Alexei-senpai is worth paying to see."

What do they mean, "again"? Oh, I remember now. Something similar happened on the first day when Laius and Iris fought each other for the opportunity to spar with me. Yeah, no. It's not like that, guys...

During the previous period, Alexei didn't snap out of his shock either so I just peaced out. Our battle ended inconclusively.

"Very well," senpai says. "This is a good opportunity to gauge your true powers. I won't go easy on you."

"Preciate it."

I can't take him seriously.

Based on what I've been observing, he isn't much better than the other students.

And based on the fact that he was about to launch simultaneous

magic attacks in the last class, I figured he's a typical sorcerer—his strength lies in mid- to long-range magic.

My guess is always right.

Huh? Alexei-senpai still has a self-fortification spell in effect but casts another one anyway. He's really layering it up. More than Laius did, even.

I vaguely recall my dad or Flay mentioning that casting too many enhancement spells at once can be harmful. But I don't remember in what way.

"Let's go!"

Whoa. He's fast. Way beyond the league of an Olympic athlete.

Ka-pow-pow-pow-pow! He's barraging me with attacks that remind me of one of those warrior tribe people from an anime about collecting seven mysterious balls.

But guess what?

I grab him by his wrists and block his kick with my foot.

Just as I release him, I punch him in the shoulder, chest, stomach, and finally, in the face.

"Ga-hurgh?!"

Senpai gets hurled up towards the sky.

I leap into the air.

The instant I catch up and overtake him, I deliver a roundhouse kick into his back. Now he's shooting downward. I swoop to his altitude and axe-kick him straight to the earth.

Alexei-senpai is sprawled out on the ground, twitching.

"Wh-Whoa..."

"Did you catch any of Zenfis's moves?!"

"I have no idea what he just did."

"Alexei was last year's martial arts champion..."

Wait, for realz? I guess he surprised me a little. He was tougher than Laius.

"Wonderful! Your muscles are perfect!"

The teacher approaches me, applauding excitedly.

I seize the opportunity to give him my speech.

"I have nothing more to learn from you, sensei."

"Whoa! Bold of you to say!" Professor Tank Top looks devastated.

“But you did, in fact, completely beat Guberg—and he’s at least my equal in battle. You’re right. There’s no point in you continuing to take this class.”

“Huh?!”

“Huh?”

Here I was racking my brain on how to get him to say those words, but he let me have it way easier than I expected.

“I wouldn’t mind giving you credit for meeting all the class requirements right now. But this is unprecedented. It’s not something for me to decide alone. I’ll have to speak with the school administration.”

“Please do!”

Wow! For once, my plan actually worked! Thanks, Alexei-senpai.

I hope all the other classes go down this easily.

No—I’ll *make* it happen, whatever it takes! My little cup of motivation overfloweth...

Bonus Interlude:
What the Little Sister Saw

“Amazing as always, Brother Haruto,” Charlotte utters in earnest.

The same phrase she’s said aloud countless times. Each time from the heart.

Right now, Haruto is in class at the academy. He’d just obliterated all of the practice targets. Not only his, but his opponent’s, too.

There’s no question that Charlotte enjoys witnessing her brother’s incredible exploits. But that’s not the only reason she’s secretly sitting in on his class.

While the elderly teacher quivers with his mouth hanging open, there’s another man who’s frozen in amazement.

Charlotte has been paying special attention to this young man.

Alexei Guberg. This fourth-year student is, without a doubt, the leader of the underground student council-ish entity called Numbers, wherein he’s known as Number 1.

The little girl had already identified all the other members of the group.

She’s been monitoring Alexei—the group’s core member—to get an idea of his character and abilities.

But of course, compared to Brother Haruto, they’re nothing special.

Haruto’s skill level is so far off the charts that it’s hard to gauge everyone else’s exact levels.

Oh well, at least I got to see Brother Haruto in action. Good enough for me.

The little girl seems satisfied. And yet...

Wait a minute...

A thought dawns on her.

Why did Brother Haruto decide to accept Alexei's challenge?

The huge difference in their powers is plain to see. Brother Haruto isn't the type to look down on others and snub, "*Let's face it, my victory is guaranteed,*" nor is he the type to brag about his talents.

Could it be...?

She can imagine one possible explanation. *But it's too soon to draw conclusions,* she thinks as she moves on to the next location.

"Brother Haruto truly is perfect!"

Without meaning to, she echoes Professor Tank Top's turn of phrase.

She'd just witnessed proof that Brother Haruto's physical fitness level, too, is far superior to the other students.

Once again, his opponent was Alexei Guberg.

Even though it's plain as day to Charlotte that her brother would easily defeat last year's reigning champion at the academy, it comes as a huge shock to the other classmates.

Murmurs of astonishment buzz throughout.

Despite that...

It happened again.

Haruto's talents are so far beyond that even the most advanced class wouldn't be worth attending. Surely the teacher realizes it by now—he'd been observing all his students closely since day one.

Haruto shouldn't be taking the classes; he should be the one teaching them.

In spite of Charlotte's wildly off-base observations, it is evident that Haruto volunteered to spar with Alexei.

There's no doubt about it.

She knew it. She *knew* it!

The hunch that Charlotte had in the last period feels more

concrete.

Brother Haruto must know that Alexei is Number 1 in Numbers.

This part is correct.

Yet he chose to spar with Alexei twice. His goal must be to draw the attention of Numbers by making a strong impression on their leader.

Starting to get iffy...

The more Numbers grows wary of Brother Haruto, the more they'll have to refrain from acting in the open. And knowing that □

Of course, this isn't Haruto's intention at all. The only reason for his efforts is his goal to be a shut-in.

□*the more Numbers is distracted by Brother Haruto, the easier it'll be for us, Camelot, to engage in our activities! How thoughtful he is of us...*

Charlotte widens her eyes.

"Amazing as always, Brother Haruto," she squeals under her breath so that no one will overhear.

Wildly inaccurate assumptions.

However...

That day, Alexei Guberg calls the Numbers representatives for an emergency meeting.

In a large, dark room illuminated only by a candelabra, the sketchy-looking squad is gathered around a round table. They're wearing their full-face headdresses, each marked with a number on their foreheads.

"To think he trounced you like a child..." comments 4.

"The boy's been a fairly lowkey student up until now," muses 9, who seems to be a girl.

The group goes around sharing their reactions to Alexei's account of the mock battle with Haruto that day.

In an unusually grim voice, Number 1 intones, "Perhaps he's

figured out...that I'm a member of Numbers."

Murmuring ripples through the hooded figures.

"This must be a warning for me to□no, for *us* to cease our operation."

The girl in the headwear marked 9 questions, "But does he have any conclusive proof that you're a member of Numbers?"

"Given his talents, it wouldn't be surprising that he knows. And even if he doesn't, perhaps he determined that by defeating an upperclassman in the highest-level class, the news will travel to Numbers."

The headdresses nod in agreement.

Of course, this isn't Haruto's intention at all. His only motive is to become a shut-in.

But the group proceeds to misread and misinterpret his actions...

"He's got us gridlocked."

...and arrive at a completely wrong conclusion.

To Haruto, they're nothing more than a silly little afterschool club playing "secret organization" who pose no threat whatsoever.

But ultimately, Charlotte's delusion becomes a reality.

Despite Haruto's total lack of involvement, Numbers is forced to limit their operations, thus enabling Camelot to run about freely.

Of course, this development is only a natural result of Charlotte's knack for comprehending and analyzing situations. Her deep devotion to Haruto is unrelated.

The score for today's battles: one win, one loss. Or maybe one win, one tie.

It does feel disappointing since this mission requires an all-out winning streak.

The funny thing is, if I consider the string of losses that led up to this day, it's quite an achievement. Not bad, me.

I set out to confer with my advisor, Professor Tear, to report the results and discuss my strategy moving forward.

I still don't know if relying on her is a good idea. But she *is* a teacher. I'm sure she's got a few connections that are inaccessible to students. Or so I hope.

I arrive at the lonely old building in the middle of the forest.

As usual, it's so far and hard to get to... It's a drag overall.

Huh? I spy two silhouettes beside the building.

One of them is my dear angel, Charlotte. *Why's she sitting on the ground huddled up?* I follow her gaze and see a girl with a white ponytail jumping and spinning around.

"Char, what are you doing here?"

"Brother Haruto! I'm observing Miss Iris's magic training!"

"Magic training?"

Iris stops and turns to me.

"What else does it look like?"

As far as I can tell, clobbering an enemy into submission? But I guess she could be checking her self-fortification magic and whatnot.

Iris replies, "Perfect timing. If you're not doing anything, I'd love to get your advice—oh, sorry. I don't mean to be annoying."

I must've made a face. Now I feel kinda bad.

“You were having Char watch you. How about getting her feedback first?”

She averts her gaze uncomfortably. Looks like she already received some kind of pointer from Char.

“What did you tell her?” I ask Char.

“Iris’s form is beautiful. Captivating, in fact. But she’s missing a sort of gusto□I suggested that she try to heighten her mana and move like, *Ka-ZOOSH! Ka-vwamma vwamma vwamma vwam!* With more agility, is what I said.”

“I understand.” I don’t.

Char’s the kind of genius who relies heavily on intuition.

Not surprising that an amateur can’t comprehend what she means. Me included.

Actually, Iris isn’t an amateur, either. But her brilliance is logic-based. They’re probably not that compatible to begin with.

“Char’s advice is... Um, well, I’m going to work hard to digest and integrate it. But Haruto, I’d love to get your guidance, too.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know much about magic...”

She probably knows way more than I do. After all, she got the highest grade on the written portion of the entrance exam.

Iris presses, “Your mana level may be extremely low, but you’re able to wield more magic than me. What’s your secret?”

Hah, I don’t have one! But that’d be a mean thing to say out loud. Honestly though, my Barrier magic is just really different.

“Go ahead and do something. I’ll watch,” I suggest.

I doubt watching her will change anything, but at least it’ll buy me time to come up with some legitimate-sounding advice.

I sit down next to Char in the same pose.

Iris casts a self-enhancement spell and starts moving around like she’s shadow-karate-ing.

“Like Char said, your physical control is smooth and flowing. Not a single wasted move,” I say to her. Frankly, I have no clue if that’s even true.

I do think her form is polished, though.

But at the same time, I’m confident I can beat her easily.

I don’t tell her that, of course. I know how to read a room.

Iris is already struggling with the fact that her mana level is low. She desperately wants to get stronger. It’d be too cruel for someone who’s supposedly beneath her to tell her she’s no match.

Hmm. What do I say, though?

I can’t just sit here staring at her.

I stick my customized Mija’s Crystal (Upgraded Edition) over my eyeballs and scan her. All it does is tell me her mana level and elements.

Not only does she have all four basic elements, but she’s even got Light, Darkness, and Chaos. Unfortunately, her current mana level is a mere 5 out of her maximum of 35.

Under normal circumstances, she wouldn’t even be qualified to attend this school.

And her level’s been stuck at a 5 for quite some time. Her level is “closed,” as they say.

But why does that happen in the first place?

I recall Professor Tear saying that even if modern magic couldn’t “open” a person’s mana level, there might be a way to do it with Ancient Magic. But that doesn’t seem possible without at least knowing the reason for the problem.

The reason... The reason, huh.

Vzzzz!

I hear a weird noise.

Followed by a sharp pain deep in my head.

Wh-What's happening...?

I notice something growing out of Iris's back. Ever so faintly, I can see a cluster of long, thin...

"Haruto, what do you think? Do you have any advice? Oh—what's the matter? You're drenched in sweat!"

"Huh?"

Am I?

I put a hand to my forehead. She's right—I am drenched.

"Brother Haruto...?"

Char gazes up at me worriedly, too.

"I'm sorry," exclaims Iris. "I didn't realize you weren't feeling well. You should go inside the lab and rest."

Iris bows her head in apology. The weird things growing out of her back are gone.

I rise to my feet.

"Iris. Can you stand right there and close your eyes?"

"Huh? But...are you okay?"

"Yeah, don't worry. There's something I want to check."

"I've never seen you so serious. Okay, then... Like this?"

Iris relaxes her body and stands still, eyes closed.

"Focus your attention inwardly. Now, stay like that."

I'm just buying time. There's no real reason for her to do that.

I stand behind her and fix my gaze at her back.

Vzzzzz...

Vwom, vwom. My brain feels like it's throbbing.

But I ignore it and keep going. This is strangely thrilling.

So... What are these?

The things I could only vaguely see before are now crystal clear.

Threads?

Dimly glowing string-like thingies. At first glance, they look smooth like threads of silk.

They appear to be growing straight out of Iris's back through her clothes.

There are exactly thirty-five of them. Of those, five are stretched out and connected to the ground.

Five out of thirty-five.

There's no doubt about it.

The glowing threads represent her max mana level. The ones linked to the ground indicate her current mana level.

And I think I figured out why Iris's mana level hasn't been going up.

Of the thirty strings that don't reach the ground, there's one that's longer than the rest.

But it's tangled around the five that are connected to the earth.

If I can untangle it and straighten it out, maybe it'll reach the ground.

I try to touch the thread.

Whsh. My fingers pass right through it. Just a guess but they seem to be on a different plane of space-time.

"Haruto? How long should I do this?"

"Keep going. Focus inwardly as deeply as you can."

"Okay."

I can't touch it with my hands. *In that case...*

I try enveloping it in a barrier.

It works. But my head feels like it's going to crack open.

I've come this far. I can't quit now.

Char looks worried so I force a smile. Carefully, I unravel the knotted thread.

Just as I position its tip to the ground...

Ba-dump! Iris's body jerks.

Then, something unbelievable happens.

Seventeen of the shorter strings start to grow longer and longer until they plunge straight into the earth.

"Ngh... Aaaaugh!!!"

Iris screams in agony.

Oh, no. What if I did something really bad?

I catch Iris before she collapses. She's sweating like crazy—like someone threw a bucket of water on her. Whoa, she's not wearing underwear! I can see her nipples. *Ack! Don't look!*

"Hey, are you okay?" I ask her.

She's obviously not but I can't think of anything else to say.

"Oh my goodness, oh my goodness!" Char's flailing around.

"I see. She's in 'mana overload.'" I hear a voice out of nowhere. "It can happen when you overuse your mana, but that's not what I just saw. Haruto, what did you do?"

Professor Tear appears out of the blue (but she was probably spying on us the whole time) and dashes over to check on Iris.

I reply, "You seem calm enough to handle this so let me answer your question with a question—is Iris going to be okay?"

"Her symptoms don't seem too severe. Iris, you're conscious, aren't you?"

"Y-Yes. It was just so sudden... I was caught by surprise... But this is... No way..."

Professor Tear and I tilt our heads.

“My level...went up...”

She intones not as a question, but as a statement.

Oh? So you can feel it when your mana level goes up? My mana level was at its max (yeah, it's 20 got a problem?) when I was born, so I've never had that experience.

But she's right.

Her mana level is 23 now. And it corresponds to the number of glowing threads that are currently connected to the ground.

Iris widens her eyes and stares at me in disbelief.

“Haruto... Did you do this?” Her voice quivers.

“No, it wasn't me. It's the result of your own valiant efforts, Iris.”

I hope that sounds convincing.

But...

“Even so... It's because you advised me, Haruto...”

Tears are streaming down her face.

“Thank you, Haruto! Thank you so much!”

She flings her arms around me and squeezes tightly. *Geez, you're really strong.*

Iris is sobbing uncontrollably.

It's contagious—now Char's tearing up, too.

Smack. I feel a pat on my back.

I glance to the side. And slightly downwards.

“I'm looking forward to a thorough explanation.”

The tiny professor is grinning from ear to ear. Behind her glasses, I catch a gleam in her eye.



Turns out Iris wasn't exactly fine. When she stopped sobbing, she passed out. Professor Tear was just running her mouth as usual.

I hoist Iris onto my back and carry her inside the building into the professor's resting room.

On the way, I ask Char, "By the way, why are you here?"

She didn't come just to oversee Iris's training, did she?

"I'm here to talk to Professor Tear about something."

My little sister gives me a dazzling smile. Adorbs.

Professor Tear, on the other hand, seems puzzled. "Er... Pleased to meet you. And who might you be?"

Come to think of it, this is the first time she's meeting Char in person.

The mysterious researcher Weiss Owl always hides her identity behind a white mask. She's not fooling anyone, but Professor Tear is kind enough to play along.

However...

"Huh?" Char tilts her head, confused.

"Oh!" She gasps after a moment. "Pleased to meet you! Yes, this is the first time you and I are meeting! Right, of course! I'm Charlotte Zenfis, younger sister of Brother Haruto!"

"Charmed," Professor Tear replies. She then slides up to me and whispers, "Is she okay? Her behavior is a tad concerning..."

"I appreciate your big-hearted support," I say.

"If she gets in trouble, I'm not cleaning up after her."

Duh. It's my job to look after my little sister. I have no intention of ceding that role.

Char watches our hushed convo bemusedly. Feeling guilty for leaving her out, I ask her, "What did you want to talk with Professor Tear about, Char?"

"Oh! Um, um... It pains me to keep secrets from you, Brother

Haruto. But it would pain me even more to burden you...” Char mumbles.

I’m aware of her “secret games” and I have no intention of interfering.

“Is this about Numbers?” I whisper, trying to sound ominous.

Char gasps. “Amazing as always, Brother Haruto. Nothing gets by you.”

It was just a random guess but apparently I hit the nail on the head.

“Don’t worry about me. Do as you like,” I tell her.

“Thank you ever so much. Someday, I hope to show you how we’ve all grown.” Charlotte’s eyes glitter.

In contrast, Professor Tear seems unamused. “What’s with the little act? I’ll thank you not to rope me in.”

Too bad, lady. You’ve already gotten yourself involved to the point of no return.

After we lay Iris down in the resting room, Professor Tear leads us into the lab.

I feel like I’m forgetting something. Oh well. I can’t remember so it’s probably nothing important.

“Now, let’s hear exactly what happened with Iris. That was no ordinary event.”

Why does Professor Tear keep glancing at Char?

Anyhow, I give her the facts—the weird thread-like things coming out of Iris’s back and all.

“Well, well. Very interesting.” Professor Tear nods in satisfaction.

Teach her one step and she’d be ahead by another ten, and from there, she’d cook up a hundred more crazy fantasies, or something.

“What were those glowing strings?” I inquire.

“You ask when you clearly know the answer. Are you testing me? As I’m sure you guessed, they’re the very *conceptualized form* of mana levels.”

“O...kay?”

“No doubt the number of glowing threads is the max mana level, and the number of the ones connecting to the ground indicates the current mana level. When a person’s level is ‘closed,’ something is preventing the threads from connecting to the ground. Most likely, they’re tangled, as was the case with Iris.”

Professor Tear drops her shoulders and sighs, “Goodness... What a conundrum.” And then, she points a finger straight at me.

“You! You’re practically a god.”

What the heck kind of thing is that to say?

“At this point, I’m convinced. You’re at least at the level of the legendary beings of the mythical ages. No—in fact, you’re beyond them. Visually perceiving mana levels and furthermore, tinkering with them—that is the realm of a god. What *are* you?!”

Her rant is nonsensical.

“But when I try to get a good look at them, I get a headache,” I counter.

“The fact that *that’s* all you seem to get away with is an enigma. An enigma, I say!”

Okay, you need to calm down.

Char seems extremely excited by this.

“Not only can you see them... You can touch them and move them as you desire. Amazing as always, Brother Haruto!”

“Amazing indeed. Hmm...”

Professor Tear is eyeing me up and down. I can guess what she’s

thinking.

“I’m not pulling anyone’s threads out of the ground,” I say.

“Of course, I wouldn’t want you to. At least not mine. But aren’t you a bit curious to try it? Will it make the person’s level decrease? What other effects might it have? It’s truly thrilling to hypothesize!”

Truly thrilling, she says. This woman has no compassion when it comes to total strangers.

“Question, Professor Tear!” Char raises her hand enthusiastically. “Brother Haruto said that when he untangled one of the threads and connected it to the ground, a bunch of other threads started growing and Iris’s level went up a bunch. What do you make of that?”

“Hard work is what raises an individual’s mana level. Iris hasn’t just been sitting around doing nothing since her level closed. The efforts she accumulated finally bore fruit all at once.”

“So like experience points,” I mumble.

“Oh? You interpret the accumulation of effort numerically? What an interesting concept.”

“Like in an RPG,” Char notes.

“A what?”

Professor Tear looks lost, but she decides to let it go. She turns to me with her sparkling eyes. “There’s something I’d like to try as soon as possible. What do you say?”

“I hope you don’t intend to drag other people into this.”

“There’s no need to put it like that. This is about you. Aren’t you curious to see your true mana level with your own eyes?”

Oh, that.

“I can’t see my own back.”

I tried it already on the way here.

It’s physically impossible to turn my head far enough. And it doesn’t work when I try to look at myself through a surveillance

barrier or a mirror.

Seems like I need to look at the person's back with my own eyes. Even if I try to search for my threads connecting to the ground, it doesn't work. I can't find any.

Professor Tear closes in on me and lowers her voice. "You could chop your head off. You have such a method, don't you? The one that you used on that devil."

"The idea of doing that to myself is kinda..."

I don't wanna be like the Dullahan.

Besides, I've already created a Mija's Crystal that displays up to three digits. Even when I measured with that, my level was still just a 2.

The whispered conversation continues.

"There's no way it could be four digits, could it?" I ponder.

"I wouldn't be surprised if your mana level is more than 100 or 200. But four digits would be far, far beyond the realm of the legendary beings of yore. Literally off the charts. Oh, but"

At this point, honestly, I don't care all that much about my level. It's not like knowing would change anything.

"Come to think of it," Professor Tear mumbles to herself. "I've never actually seen your measurement results."

She suggests aloud, "First, let's have you take a look at mine."

"Sure. I don't mind."

Wait why are you taking off your lab coat?

"Ooh! In that case, mine too."

Char follows the professor's lead and starts stripping down.

"The threads stick out through your clothes. There's no need to get undressed," I insist.

I need a clear view of the person's backside, but it doesn't matter if they're wearing clothes. *Ain't that a mystery.*

“These conceptualized mana levels are connected to the human body. By examining how they’re coming out of the flesh, it may lead to new discoveries.”

Professor Kiddy Glasses quickly unbuttons her shirt.

My little sister’s already completely naked from the waist up, ready to go.

“Now, go ahead and take a good look!”

“Go right ahead, Brother Haruto!”

I wish the two of them would at least hide their modest chests.

Wait a minute. I know this scenario...

I get a bad feeling. And as a rule, the moment a flag goes up, an event is guaranteed to occur.

Maybe it’s partially my fault for letting this happen, but I think the bigger blame should be on the teacher who strips half-naked in front of her student.

And, of course, at the worst possible moment, the door bursts open.

“Haruto? Are you in h-hyaw?!”

Oh, Iris. You’re up. She really should’ve stayed put and rested a bit longer.

“Wh-Wh-Wh... I’m s-so sorry! I didn’t realize the two of you are in that sort of rela... Wait, Char, you too? Why?”

Iris averts her eyes, her face beet red.

“I-I wanted to thank you but... I’m sorry I interrupted! Enjoy yourselves!”

She’s severely misreading the situation but before any of us can explain, she turns around to leave.

However, she stops abruptly.

Not because I'd called after her—I didn't. I figured it'd be too much trouble to explain, so I'd decided to let it go.

Iris gets pushed back into the room by a bustling crowd of people.

“Is Haruto Zenfis in here? There you are. Stay right there!”

The group is led by a very attractive female teacher with a monocle. Professor Oratoria Belkam. Following behind her are Professor Tank Top, the old dude, and my homeroom teacher.

Here comes another huge inconvenience.

Belkam demands, “Let's get right to the point. You're—what the?!”

Her piercing gaze shifts from me to the half-naked Professor Kiddy Glasses.

I wasn't about to let those skeezy guys get a look at Char, so I'd quickly hid her with a barrier before they noticed.

But since I was busy prioritizing my little sister, it was too late to do anything about Professor Tear.

This does not look good.

A male student and a half-naked female professor alone in a room.

No matter what angle anyone looks at it from, it looks like an immoral, forbidden relationship about to unfold.

Are these grounds for expulsion? My heart leaps for a second.

Then again, I don't want to get expelled for inappropriate behavior. That would definitely make my family look bad.

But what can I do at this point? A sense of resignation sinks into my chest.

There's probably no point in making excuses. I might as well suck it up, confess, and get banished from the academy. And drag down Professor Kiddy Glasses with me...

“D-D-Don't loo-o-o-k!!”

Professor Belkam unleashes a barrage of karate chops and knee-kicks to the three male professors standing behind her.

““““Hngblurgh!!””””

Incredible. She even knocks out the close combat expert Professor Tank Top in a single blow.

This is practically a comedy sketch.

In any case...

“Investigating Ancient Magic?!”

Professor Belkam stands tall with her arms crossed and glares us down like we're street thugs.

She's got Professor Tear (wrapped in a lab coat) and me kneeling in front of her while she demands an explanation.

Iris and Char are off in a corner of the room, looking extremely awkward.

The male teachers are still unconscious on the floor.

Total chaos.

“Be specific. What *exactly* were you investigating that required you to be naked?!”

“There's no point in explaining to you. You wouldn't understand,” Professor Tear quips.

“Why, you little...”

Professor Belkam is boiling. Professor Tear eggs her on until the argument escalates into a screaming match.

If this was Professor Tear's plan all along, it seems to be working. Before long, Professor Belkam has forgotten all about the whole nudity thing.

“So, Ora, what did you want to talk with Haruto about anyway?”

“It's Oratoria. Don't cut my name short. Anyway... Ahem. We

came to discuss Haruto Zenfis's future at the academy."

"You mean... I'm expelled?"

"I don't know why you're looking at me with stars in your eyes, but no. Although, you're not entirely off base..."

"Quit beating around the bush and just get to the point," provokes Professor Tear.

Will you knock it off with the browbeating? Geez, she's even more socially inept than I am.

Professor Belkam glares, but the tiny professor seems utterly unbothered. The monocled teacher decides to ignore her and turns back to me.

"In both the theory classes and the practical classes, we've deemed your abilities to be beyond the scope of a student's."

"Does that mean I get to graduate? Whoopie!"

"Don't start celebrating yet! I'm not finished."

"Y-Yes, ma'am. Sorry."

Professor Belkam clears her throat again and resumes.

"We can't just let you graduate that easily. No student has ever completed all the courses in less than two months. On the other hand, confining your time to lessons would be unfair to you. You're only fifteen; there's much more out there for you to learn than magic skills."

"So what exactly does that mean?"

Quit beating around the bush and—err, she's glaring at me.

"We're going to have you stay at the academy for at least two years. However, you'll be exempt from taking classes. You may pursue your interests freely."

Whoa! Which means I can be a shut-in at school for two years.

This is a sudden turn of events. I guess all my hard work (lol) paid off.

“However□”

What? Is there a condition?

“□this is what we, your teachers, have determined. We’ll still need to consult with the school administration. And when we do, they’ll probably want to give you an assignment. We came here today to confirm whether you’re willing to take on the challenge.”

“I’ll do it.”

“I’m still not finished.”

Whatever the challenge is, if it means I can chill in my room for two years with the school’s approval, I’m willing to do it.

Professor Belkam looks exasperated with me.

Just as she’s about to say something, Professor Tear interrupts. “The Olympius Ruins exploration test, I presume? It’s always the same.”

“I was going to tell him!”

Once again, the two women start their squabbling.

Exploration of ruins? What could that be?

While the two teachers are preoccupied with each other, I look over at Iris□who’s still looking dazed□and ask her telepathically.

“So... Are you and the professor dating?” the white-haired girl responds.

She’s not getting my message.

By the way, when did Char leave?



Around a large circular table on the bank of a quiet lake...

The Knights of the Round Table have been summoned to an emergency meeting.

“□in conclusion, Brother Haruto’s circumstances are on the verge

of a major shift!” Charlotte announces sharply.

“Incredible! To be able to see a person’s mana level... And even touch it!”

“Sir Haruto never ceases to amaze me. I’m baffled by the logic, though...”

Both Flay and Liza are shuddering, but for different reasons.

Meanwhile, Johnny and Gigan, the summoned monsters, are interested in a different topic.

“It sounds like they’re leaning towards excusing Master Haruto from classes. That seems expected enough, given that our master’s powers surpass the realm of the gods. In fact, I’m surprised it took this long,” remarks Johnny.

“I hope he comes home soon,” Gigan says wistfully.

Char scans the club members.

“We all know Brother Haruto’s powers are exceptional, but visual detection and physical manipulation of one’s mana level is still uncharted waters.”

“He already wields such great powers, yet he continues to advance. He is astounding,” praises Flay.

“Yes. Incredible,” Liza nods.

Johnny asks, “Is this the ‘awakening’ you’ve been occasionally speaking of, Lady Charlotte?”

“He’s...waking up?” says Gigan.

Charlotte nods affirmingly.

“We want to support him in unraveling the mystery, but merely looking at the threads seems to put great stress on him. If we make a fuss about it, Brother Haruto□being the all-too-kind person he is□might overexert himself, forgetting his own wellbeing.”

Now that Charlotte’s had more time to reflect, she regrets piggybacking on Tearietta’s idea so heedlessly.

“Right. It’s best if we wait for Sir Haruto to take the lead in this matter.”

“We wouldn’t want to burden him.”

“If there comes a time when he’s in a slump, I shall offer my body as a test subject. Even though I am mere bones.”

“Me too. Even though I’m stone.”

They agree not to make any moves until Haruto asks for their assistance.

For once, the Knights of the Round Table reach a reasonable conclusion. They move on to the next item on their agenda.

“Like Johnny said, it’s surprising it took this long for the school to excuse him from classes,” Liza points out.

“How could those ignorant fools be so oblivious? It’s about time!” Flay jeers. “Why don’t we kidnap the head of the school and those teachers, and show them how powerful *we* are? They might finally get a sense of Sir Haruto’s greatness□given that his strength is far beyond ours.”

“We mustn’t, Flay!” Char rejects the radical suggestion. “Superheroes must keep their identities a secret. Brother Haruto has been careful not to let on that he’s Shiva. Although, given his powers, I imagine they’ll figure it out eventually.”

Really, Haruto was just desperately pretending to be a failure, but Charlotte and company have made their own convenient interpretation.

“I’m sure Brother Haruto will handle this matter immaculately. I think it’s best if we don’t interfere.”

“Yes, that’s probably best.”

“I agree.”

“Gigan and I can’t operate at the academy anyway, so no objections here.”

Once again, the members of the Round Table arrive at a conclusion that happens to be favorable for Haruto.

The emergency meeting of the Round Table is about to conclude without any problems. Until...

“By the way, there is one thing I’m wondering about.”

Charlotte’s tone is grave. (But as always, adorable.)

“Brother Haruto seems to have revealed some of his powers to Professor Tear.”

“What?! Oh, you mean his ability to perceive mana levels?”

“Yes. He was seeking Professor Tear’s perspective.”

Murmurs stir throughout all the members. Except for Gigan, who’s dozed off.

“Does this mean that Sir Haruto has decided to trust that woman?” The air around Liza starts to cool.

Johnny offers, “It’s too soon to draw that conclusion. Perhaps our master decided that he couldn’t hide the matter since she was there watching as he ‘opened’ the young lady Iris’s mana level.”

“It’s possible. Nothing slips by that woman. Perhaps Sir Haruto deemed it better to make use of her knowledge than to skirt around her.”

“In that case, she’s served her purpose, hasn’t she?”

The vibe among the Knights seems to be getting hostile.

Charlotte rushes to intervene. “I get the sense that Brother Haruto appreciates Professor Tear’s knowledge. Which is why□”

She sweeps her gaze over each member as she confidently proposes:

“□I think it’s time we invite her to join Camelot.”

“No way.”

“I don’t trust her yet.”

“I’m not the most knowledgeable, but I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“zzZ...”

Really? Charlotte is disappointed. Meanwhile...

Far off in the distance, Tearietta and Haruto are chatting in the lab’s meeting room.

“I just felt the strangest chill run up my spine—as if to warn me, ‘You’re about to get involved in something crazy,’ followed by another oddly mixed feeling that ‘somehow everything is going to be okay, then again, maybe not.’ What could it mean?”

“How should I know?” Haruto shrugs skeptically.



There’s a possibility I can officially be excused from taking classes.

I slept like a baby holding that hope close to my heart. The next morning, I head to Professor Tear’s lab building.

She’s offered me one of her rooms to use as a basecamp for my on-campus shut-in life.

I might be jumping the gun a little, but I trust that by putting myself in the position first physically, I’ll catch up mentally.

The suite she gave me has been used as storage for so long. It really needs a good cleaning.

Sucks, but there’s nothing I can do about it.

Albeit all I have to do is stash the useless junk in mystery space-time and everything will be nice and tidy.

My space is the corner room on the second floor.

I'm bubbling with excitement as I approach the room.

"Good morning, Brother Haruto!"

I'm greeted by Charlotte, who's got her sleeves rolled up and her hair tied back. She's wearing an apron.

Don't tell me...

"Char, what are you doing?"

"I was informed that this room is to be your base of operations, Brother Haruto. I'm here to clean!" My little angel Charlotte is all smiles.

Come to think of it, I mentioned it to her last night. She sure acts fast.

As I'm melting at her sweet smile, a reddish silhouette leaps out from behind her.

"Ha-hah! When you need cleaning, you need a maid. And when you need a maid, you've got Flay. Leave the tidying to me!"

I haven't seen Flay in a while. Glad to see she's the same as ever.

Stoked to do her maid thing, the demoness sets down an armful of junk on the hallway floor. *What are you going to do with that?*

"Oh, Sir Haruto. Good morning."

Next appears Liza.

She, too, dumps an armful of junk in the hall. *Again, what are you going to do—oh, whatever. I'll get rid of it later.*

By the way, Liza has her horns and tail hidden. Flay's ears and tail are out. Eh, I guess it doesn't matter here.

If my little sister's being kind enough to offer to clean up, I should help, too. As her big brother.

"Hrm? What's with all the ruckus so early in the morning?"

Professor Tear makes an entrance in her pajamas, rubbing her eyes. She's wearing a Santa Claus-style nightcap. Looks like she slept

in her bed for once.

“Good morning, Professor Tear ♪”

Charlotte greets her with a full smile.

Professor Tear replies dubiously, “Ah, good morning, Char. You’re here again.”

“Yes! I look forward to seeing you more.”

For a second, it looked like Professor Tear shuddered at the sight of Char. But there’s nothing to fear—Char’s just cute, that’s all.

“But it’s not easy for non-members to enter the academy... Never mind. What brings you here today?”

“To clean!”

The teacher can’t help but let out a dry chuckle at the little girl’s chipper response.

As for the professor, she doesn’t look like she intends to get dressed or help. She just stands there.

Oh well. I start helping Char and the girls clean.

“May we throw out all this junk?” I ask the teacher.

“No, you may not,” Tear retorts. “Even though a certain part of me knows that they’ll never be useful for anything, I’m convinced they’ll come in handy one day.”

“You have no plans to use it, right? Then let’s toss it.”

“But that’d be a waste!”

“Keeping it would be a waste of space.”

I ignore the protests of the sad hoarder and throw the junk into mystery space-time.

“Storage magic?! How did you do that?!”

Great, now she’s making a bigger fuss.

Liza approaches me and whispers, “Sir Haruto? Are you sure you want to let her see your Ancient Magic?”

Come to think of it, I haven’t told the girls that I’d let Professor

Tear in on the fact that I'm Shiva.

"Yeah. It's fine," I say.

While I'm trying to think of what to say next, Liza walks over to Char and Flay. The three of them start whispering to each other.

"See? I knew it. Brother Haruto is..."

"I still don't trust..."

"But if Sir Haruto does ..."

I know it's wrong to eavesdrop, but now that it's caught my attention, I can't help overhearing.

"I'll speak with Professor Tear again. If we sit down and have an honest conversation, maybe I'll be able to understand her character better."

"Can you handle it alone?"

"I'll go with you."

What are they talking about? I missed the first part, so I don't know what's going on. Sounds like they want to have some kind of serious talk with Professor Tear?

It's probably related to their Numbers shenanigans.

In which case, my job would be to keep an eye on them without spoiling their fun.

"Y-Y-Yikes!" The professor shudders. "I'm getting an even more intense chill up my spine than yesterday!"

Don't worry. It'll be fun.

"Speaking of which," she lowers her voice, "you haven't told them that you revealed Shiva's identity to me?"

Now we're the ones whispering.

"I'm waiting for the right moment."

She gives me the stink eye. *Please don't look at me like that.*

What else can I do?

I'd confessed a secret I haven't even told my parents yet to some

random loli professor. My dignity will be at stake.

Anyway, back to cleaning. It should be a breeze with four people.

In no time at all, the room's spic-and-span. The floor, walls, and ceiling are squeaky clean. The space is slightly larger than my dorm room. But it's totally empty.

I furnish the new place with a bed and dresser I whipped out of mystery space-time. Professor Tear goes nuts over the stunt while Flay holds her back from behind.

My new base is almost set up.

The only thing left is to connect it to the lake cabin AKA my paradise with an "Anywhere Door."

But I'll do that when Professor Tear's gone. I don't want her barging in on my paradise.

It's still a bit early for lunch, but we all move to a bigger room and devour the meals that Flay packed.

"By the way, how do you think it's going for Professor Belkam right now?" I ask.

She and the other teachers marched off to the school administration to petition for my class attendance exemption.

Speak of the devil...

I hear haughty footsteps approaching in the hallway.

"Where's Haruto Zenfis?"

Here she is, Professor Belkam.

"There you are. Hm? I see some new faces. And that one with the red hair, is she a demon?"

Whoops. Flay's ears and tail are totally visible.

"Oh well. Not an issue."

It's not?

"Professor Belkam, welcome back. How did the negotiations go?"

"Smooth sailing from start to finish. The rest is up to you."

“Thank you so much!”

Now all I have to do is go explore some ruins and I can be a shut-in at school. Nice, nice.

“The headmistress will explain the details. Go on over there now.”

“Whaaaa?!”

The screeching is coming from Professor Tear. Not me.

“Wait a minute! Ora, did the negotiations really succeed?”

“Like I said, smooth sailing from start to finish. We communicated our wishes as Haruto’s instructors. The headmistress was, *for the most part*, understanding. She says she’ll finalize her decision after speaking with Haruto Zenfis himself.”

I’m not thrilled about the extra step, but I guess it makes sense that she’d want to meet me in person since I’m the one taking (or not taking) the classes.

But...

“Don’t you mean the negotiations were, *for the most part*, a failure?”

Professor Tear’s reaction is ominous.

“But it’s Haruto Zenfis. He should have no problem...”

And why is Professor Belkam looking away?

I chime in, “Is the headmistress, like, scary or something?”

I remember seeing her once during the freshman entrance ceremony. From what I recall, she looked young and easygoing. (But I hear she’s older than she looks.) I was half-asleep though, so I don’t remember exactly.

“She’s not a malicious person or anything. In fact, I’ve never known anyone so pure—oh, I suppose there’s someone in this room who’d rival her. But of the opposite strain. Which is why you and the

headmistress would be very incompatible.”

Pure? She must mean Char. But what does she mean by “of the opposite strain”?

“There’s just one thing you should be careful of.”

Professor Tear points a finger straight at me and declares:

“Be sure to play the part of a serious, dedicated student!”

Yeah, no. That’s impossible.

I bite my tongue.



The headmistress’s office is on the very top floor of the main campus building. Here I am, all by myself, in front of the door.

I know what the headmistress looks like but I’ve never spoken to her before.

Now I gotta endure the torture of having a one-on-one conversation with someone I’ve never been within thirty feet of. I really want out.

My only hope was Professor Tear, but when I asked her to come with me, she flat-out refused.

“If I go with you, it’ll get messy. The headmistress despises people like me.”

Professor Tear seems to be fully aware of her faults, yet she refuses to change. In a way, I kinda respect her.

I have no choice. I gather my guts, take some deep breaths, and knock on the door.

“Excuse me. It’s Haruto Zenfis.”

Ka-chak. I open the door.

“You’re late, Haruto.”

A muscular middle-aged, bearded man with a stern but handsome face is standing in front of me, hands on his hips. He looks exactly like Count Gold Zenfis—my adoptive dad.

Ka-cham. I close the door. *What was that? A mirage?*

Oh! Could he be a long-lost brother of my dad’s? But then what’s he doing in the headmistress’s office?

Ka-chak. The door swings open.

“What the heck are you doing?” he says.

My dad’s look-alike seems to know me. Okay, I guess I’ll quit playing stupid since there’s nobody to appreciate my dumb joke but me.

“What are you doing here, Dad?”

“Come in. Then we’ll talk.”

At my dad’s urging, I step inside.

“Welcome, Haruto. Thank you for coming all this way.”

In the center of the room is a desk facing the entrance. And behind it is a pretty lady with an affectionate smile.

Her hair is long, pink, and wavy. She’s probably around my mom’s age but she looks young. Which is true of my mom, too. Actually, my mom’s definitely winning. But the pink-haired lady is wearing a skin-tight business suit, and her big breasts look like they’re suffocating in it. I’ll call it a draw.

“As I suppose you know, I am Theresia Montpellier, headmistress of the Royal Granfelt Specialized Academy of Magic.”

Headmistress Theresia rises gracefully and invites my dad and me

to the guest sofa. We sit down, side by side.

She prepares the tea herself, sets it in front of us, and takes a seat on the adjacent sofa.

“I thought you might be nervous, being summoned to a private meeting with the headmistress, especially since we’ve never met before. I heard that Count Zenfis just happens to be in the capital on official business, so I invited him to join us.”

That was incredibly thoughtful of her. She’s really nice!

My dad explains, “The king wanted to speak with me about the recent insurrection in the capital. I was planning to drop by and check on you afterwards. That’s when the headmistress reached out.”

Wow. What perfect timing for me.

So that spineless king went crying to my dad, huh. I hope he didn’t say anything out of line. I’d better look into it later—actually, nah. I can’t be bothered.

“So, Headmistress. I understand you wanted to speak with me about Haruto. What might the issue be?”

The headmistress smiles warmly as she starts, “There’s been a request from the instructors of his classes.”

“A request? Haruto may seem unmotivated, but I certainly hope that he’s taking his classes seriously...”

Ouch.

My dad looks uneasy, but the headmistress smiles reassuringly.

“Oh, no. It’s nothing bad. They’ve petitioned to exempt him from classes because his skill level exceeds the course content. They suggested we offer him an environment at the academy where he can focus on magic research and advancing his magic skills.”

Mhmm? This is better than I expected. The idea seems genuinely compatible with my shut-in lifestyle. Awesome. I’m happy. Hooray!

“Is that true... Well, if the teachers at the kingdom’s top learning

institution are giving him the recognition, I have no intention of interfering. But...can it be done?"

My dad's still a bit confused, but he seems slightly gleeful.

"Yes, of course it's possible. I've only heard the accounts secondhand, but in practical skill alone, we haven't seen such talent since the Flash Princess... In fact, we sense his potential might even be greater."

"Hmm. I agree. I am constantly amazed—almost to a frightening degree—by the magnitude of his abilities."

I'm getting antsy. Never being praised in my past life has left me some scars. This situation is making me uncomfortable.

"It's still difficult to judge his academic abilities but in certain fields, he exhibits insight beyond that of an expert researcher. Haruto's perceptiveness is truly astounding."

"I see, I see. I was worried because he tended to hole up in his room back home, but apparently, he was pursuing magic research independently. To hear that he meets the academy's level through his own efforts, or even exceeds it... As a parent, I can't help feeling proud."

Okay, stop.

Having to sit here while they go back and forth marveling over me is nothing but an unsolicited humiliation play.

But all in all, I like where this is going.

In fact, it's going pretty fantastically.

Nevertheless, if I start showing off, people might suspect that I'm connected to Shiva. I'll just have to be careful on that front.

Phew, the negotiation turned out to be a piece of cake. Don't scare me.

Not that I did any of the work. Probably for the best. My dad being here has eliminated any opportunities to screw myself over.

Thanks, Dad.

I'm so convinced of my victory that I get ready to sneak some anime episodes while we're here.

Just then□

“However, this is only my personal opinion. At this point, we don't have an objective decision-making criterion.”

Say what, madam?

“And there is one critical unanswered question. How is it that Haruto boasts abilities that exceed the highest-level classes here at the academy while his mana level is a 2?”

A chill runs up my spine.

The headmistress is smiling sweetly as ever, but now it's like there's a pitch-black aura flowing out of her. Figuratively speaking, that is. There isn't actually anything crawling out of her.

She adds, “I don't want to believe it, but there's no chance his application was falsified, is there?”

Professor Tear's words echo in my mind.

“I've never known anyone so pure.”

In other words, she's the kind of woman who has zero tolerance for any kind of dishonesty. Not a single lie or a stretch of truth shall slip by her.

But this type of accusation is well anticipated. And I have a solution ready at hand.

“We can measure it right here and now if you'd like.”

I've done it a bunch before. I just have to be careful not to break the crystal.

Bring it on! I roll up my sleeves. But instead, the headmistress lowers her gaze, crestfallen.

“I’m terribly sorry. There’s no way to falsify the crystal’s results—I never should’ve called it into question. I do hope I haven’t hurt you.”

“Oh...no.”

“Honestly, I have a hard time believing it myself,” my dad chimes in. “I understand why you’d be doubtful. The fact that the crystal indicated as such is what makes the whole thing even more perplexing.”

We’re both sweating bullets because we’re fudging the truth—the fact that I have no elemental affinity is a secret.

The headmistress seems like a sweet and gentle lady, but she’s not to be taken lightly.

I gather my wits—I’m determined to emerge victoriously from this parent-teacher conference-ish predicament.



After seeing Haruto off for his appointment...

“Professor Tear, there’s something I want to talk about.” Charlotte turns to Tearietta with a serious look.

The little girl has been visiting frequently these days to see the professor, but they haven’t had a proper chance to talk until now.

“Okay,” the teacher replies casually.

She leads the girl to her meeting room, prepares tea, and sits down opposite her.

But for some reason, Liza is standing behind Charlotte, leering at the professor with her icy cold eyes.

Wh-What’s about to happen? Ulp. Tearietta takes a large gulp of tea.

“The truth is, I’m Weiss Owl.”

Charlotte pulls a white mask from out of nowhere.

“More precisely, I’m the chief representative of the group.”

Yeah, I knew that. I mean□

“Um... Oh, goodness. What a shock.” She makes a show of acting surprised.

“I’m sorry I kept it a secret for so long.” Charlotte bows sheepishly.

“Hey, no worries. We all have things we can’t share.”

“Thank you for saying so.”

“And? Did you want to talk about officially inviting me to join your group? Is that why you’ve been popping by so often?”

Charlotte shakes her head. “I hope you’ll forgive me, but as a member of Weiss Owl, I was considering investigating you and assessing your character first. However, there’s something of higher priority at the moment.”

“Higher priority? Oh, I get it.” *Spak!* Tearietta claps her hands. “Haruto’s ability to visualize an individual’s mana level. You want to research that phenomenon together. Yes, I’d love to.”

“No, not that either.”

“Eh?”

“The experiments for that will place a heavy burden on Brother Haruto. We have no business causing him trouble.”

“Whaaat?! But we’d be delving into the realm of the divine”□

“We mustn’t.”

Even her blunt rejection is somehow adorable; it doesn’t sting in the least. But behind the little girl, the professor notices a frosty breeze seeping out of Liza and decides to drop the subject.

I'll just have to negotiate with Haruto personally and proceed behind their backs, Professor Tear conspires to herself.

“In that case, what is it you wish to speak with me about?”

Charlotte wrinkles her brow and presses her lips together.

The fact that the child is hesitant indicates that she still doesn't trust me all that much, deduces Tearietta. *And Haruto still hasn't told them that he revealed himself as Shiva to me.*

If the professor brings it up herself, she'll run the risk of being executed for learning Haruto's big secret.

Still, Professor Tear does want to get closer to Charlotte.

If she can join Weiss Owl—and by extension, Camelot—her access to researching Ancient Magic with Haruto will take a huge leap forward.

It'll be a gamble. *I'm going all in,* she decides. Her legs are shaking so much that her knees are knocking.

“Actually, Charlotte, there's something I need to tell you.”

She checks her escape route while keeping an eye on Liza.

“I know Shiva's true identity.”

Fwoosh! Freezing air begins to fill the room.

“W-W-W-Wait! Haruto confessed to me! Because he wants to research Ancient Magic together!”

That last part is a teeny-weeny lie.

“Liza, please hold back.”

The rush of chill stops immediately.

Charlotte smiles tenderly. “Brother Haruto must trust you very much, Professor Tear.”

Tearietta feels a deep swell of relief.

“In that case, I trust you completely, too. Now I can reveal what I wanted to consult with you about.”

Charlotte looks straight at the teacher and announces clearly:

“I want to study at this academy with Brother Haruto!”

For a moment, Tearietta gapes in stunned silence. Then she regains her senses.

“But...I don’t have authority over that matter.”

“I understand that.”

“I would think so.”

“With that in mind, I’d like your advice as to whether there is any realistic path forward.”

That’s a difficult ask.

The professor offers, “I do think an early admission next year would be a sure bet in your case.”

Both in terms of brain and magic talent, Charlotte is way ahead of the curve.

Tearietta knows Charlotte’s max mana level. She’d managed to draw it out of Weiss Owl during one of their conversations.

“I wish to enroll as soon as possible. Ideally, right now. That’s my aim. Is there no way to make it come true?”

Even skipping grades is extremely rare. Enrolling mid-year on top of that is unprecedented. Considering that Charlotte’s only eleven, the prospect seems impossible.

But academically speaking, this child is already so advanced that she hardly needs to attend school.

Her max mana level is the highest since the greatest mage known to history.

Only a select few figures know this number. If her max mana level and her current powers were to be made public, surely no one would object.

“That’s my view of it, anyway,” Tearietta concludes.

“Unfortunately, my mother’s opinion is ‘No need to hurry.’”

Charlotte consulted her mother about her hopes of early entry to the academy, but the response was disappointing.

“She has a point,” Tearietta admits.

Count Zenfis is the leader of the king’s faction. If he suddenly boasts of his daughter’s talents out of the blue, it could cause all sorts of conjectures.

At worst, their enemies might hire assassins to eliminate Charlotte while she’s still young.

But Tearietta doesn’t let that bother her.

If this were to work, the child would owe me a debt of gratitude. Surely, it’ll work to my advantage.

Still, convincing the girl’s parents won’t be easy.

But wait!

Making the reveal seem less out of the blue *and* assuring the parents that there’s no cause for worry even if Charlotte were to be targeted by assassins.

There’s no better opportunity to fulfill those two demands than now.

“Very well. I’ll help you.”

“Thank you so much!”

“But I’ll need you to work hard, too.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Professor Tear’s heart melts a little at the sight of Charlotte prancing giddily.

Now the rest is up to Haruto...

At this very moment, the boy is in a meeting with Theresia.

Either the headmistress or Haruto is bound to bring ‘it’ up.

To demonstrate Haruto’s skills, he will have to go on a quest in a ruins site. And without a doubt, a certain agreement will be brought

up.

They might be discussing it at this very moment.

Victory.

Tearietta grins a slimy, evil grin.

Can she really be trusted?

Liza looks dubious.



Somehow, I'm on a mission to engage in a parent-teacher-ish conference with the school's headmistress and my dad.

They seem to be having a lively discussion about me, but I can't let my guard down.

"I understand Haruto is interested in Ancient Magic."

Gulp.

Now we're on a dicey topic. I hear the headmistress can't stand Professor Tearietta and her nonchalant ways. If she tells me, "*Leave that research lab and transfer to another one. Only then will you be exempt from class!*" I'm prepared to make the sacrifice and ditch Professor Tear.

Oh, but that might run the risk of the little teacher seeking revenge by revealing Shiva's identity.

If she shows any sign of doing such a thing, I'll have to abduct her and bring her to my paradise so she can continue her research there. That should satisfy her. I've got her pegged.

Alrighty, Headmistress. Name your condition!

"Interesting," the pink-haired woman says. "Ancient Magic is still a largely uncharted field of study. Its exploration might shed light on your mysterious powers, Haruto."

Oh? She's surprisingly supportive.

"But returning to the matter at hand, if you want to be exempt from attending classes, you'll have to submit proof of your talents. We must carefully assess the strengths and weaknesses in your knowledge base. As of now, we're unable to determine whether your skills are effective in real-life situations, and not just in class. As such□" the headmistress proposes composedly.

"□there are two conditions. First, for your lecture classes, you will have to pass a written exam."

Cheating will solve that issue.

Next.

"And for your practical exam, you'll be tasked with exploring the Olympius Ruins. This trial is primarily used as the final test for graduating."

Yep, I knew that already.

It's an old building crawling with monsters, and there's a labyrinth of dungeons that goes deep underground.

From what I hear, all you have to do to pass is defeat a designated monster or retrieve some item that the expert-level teachers hid deep within the labyrinth.

But the deepest vault is actually super dangerous, so much so that those expert-level teachers don't even set foot. I can't imagine they'd send a student down there.

"Haruto, your quest is to explore the dungeon's deepest vault."

"What?"

"Find and bring back one of the seven sublime weapons that's said to be hidden there."

"That's kind of insane?"

Out of pure shock, I blurt out my honest reaction. But apparently, I'm not the only one who feels that way.

"Hold on!" my dad cuts in. "That's the quest that the kingdom's greatest warrior troop—including the Flash Princess and myself—was unable to achieve. That expedition took place just before battling the Demon King. To this day, we haven't found a clue as to how to even map it out."

Impossible. Obvs. It's beyond insane.

But wait a minute. Why would she choose such a dangerous test?

Ah-hah. I get it.

This is one of those, "*I commend your courage to face such a challenge*," tests, isn't it?

"Very well. I'll do it!" I proclaim.

"Haruto?!"

Hehehe. I've got this, Dad.

Just look at the headmistress. She looks positively enraptured by my courageous pledge. Almost like a young girl in love.

"My, what a brave young man..."

See? I aced the practical exam without lifting a finger. All that's left is to cheat on the written test.

"You're sure to succeed. I believe in you. I wish you the best," praises Theresia.

Huh?

"If you're that confident, I won't try to stop you. But please, please be careful," my dad adds.

Um?

"Your time limit will be one month. If you do not complete the quest, please don't be disheartened. If that were to happen, I'll prepare a special curriculum just for you, Haruto, and I'll tutor you myself."

Wha-Wha-Whaaaaat?

This is going in a bad direction. If I don't turn this around, I'm screwed.

Then again, I'm not one of those shut-ins who've been sitting around and doing nothing with his time.

I faced all kinds of intense situations where I had to make tough choices. Choices that could possibly end me. Choices that could lead me to the right path. And I've achieved the latter more than just a few times.

You don't know what I've been through. I'm talking about games, though.

"Excuse me, but may I ask one question?"

"Please, go ahead."

"What would've happened if I'd declined the challenge?"

"The same thing as if you fail the challenge. I will tutor you personally."

I see.

This woman wants to keep me all to herself. Man, it's tough being popular with the ladies—just kidding. No time for jokes.

This is one of those situations where, on the off chance that I do succeed, I'm still gonna get labelled a freak of nature.

But I'm not a guy who cowers in the face of obstacles.

Just as I'm feeling positive about finding a solution, a revelation descends from the heavens.

I answer her, "All right, I'll do it. But I do have one request."

"What is it?"

I declare it loud and proud:

"Allow me to form an expedition party!"

What may be too much for me to handle alone might be doable with some friends at my side.

And after we emerge victorious, I'll just pin all the credit onto one of the party members and dodge getting the circus freak treatment.

How 'bout it?

The headmistress places a finger to her cheek and contemplates.

I decide to take my psychological negotiation tactics to the next level in hopes of winning her approval. The famous door-in-the-face technique.

I add, "After all, this task was so challenging that even the warriors who fought the Demon King failed. Certainly, you wouldn't object to me seeking outside help, would you?"

If she agrees, I can even bring in Shiva.

On the other hand, I doubt she'll agree to a proposition that can be exploited by bringing my own dad to the fight. After all, the test is supposed to be for students.

If she refuses, I'll show her I'm willing to compromise by suggesting, "*How about someone from within the school?*" Surely, she'll meet me halfway and at least agree to that.

Ultimately, the goal is for me to form a party.

"You may."

Awesome! Goal achieved...huh? Wait□I may what, exactly?

"You mean I may use outside help?"

"Yes. If you want, you can recruit the Earth-Shattering Warhammer. You may even reach out to the Flash Princess herself if you think you can persuade her."

Oh, nah. She's a celebrity; I'm sure she's busy with her governing duties. Besides, just the idea of collabing with my birth mother is a "no thanks" from me.

"Or even the Black Knight, who we've been hearing a lot about

lately.”

Hold on—don’t tell me her goal from the get-go was to bait Shiva. Her smile is starting to look unsettling.

“The Olympius Ruins exploration tests are usually conducted as a team. But this time, the test is curated just for you, Haruto. You’ll not only be evaluated on your individual skills, but on your collaboration and leadership skills as well.”

Huh. So she was planning to let me form a party from the start.

“Normally, the teams are comprised of students. But given the difficulty of this task, I wouldn’t feel comfortable sending a group of teens alone. So, yes. I grant you special permission to recruit anyone you please. You’re even welcome to nominate me if you’d like.”

That feels like a bad idea. I humbly decline.

“And you’re really okay with the Black Knight?”

“Of course. Although, there will be a condition—I’ve heard that his comrades also contributed significantly to peacekeeping during the recent turmoil in the capital. In any case, do you have any means to get in touch with them?”

“I don’t, but I’ll give it a try.”

“Proficiency in networking and negotiating are also crucial skills to succeeding in high society. I wish you all the best.”

I really have no idea what she’s thinking. Or is she just being sincere, like Professor Tear said? If she is, I’m even more confused.

Nevertheless, with Shiva as my party member, victory is well in sight.

I’m kinda curious about the “condition” she mentioned, but maybe I’m better off not asking right now.

If I put together my party and she rejects it, I’ll just whine and blame her.

That's right.

There's no need to fight super tough monsters. If all I need to do is find a hidden treasure, my Barrier magic should be enough to get by. Should be.

I'll lead everyone to believe Shiva was the one who found the treasure without anyone ever finding out about my weirdo magical powers.

Bring back the treasure and pass the test. And make sure Haruto Zenfis gets a few highlight moments.

Eyes on the prize. It's time to map out a plan!



I return to my place of peace (Pandemonium: The Garden of Gathering Demons, dubbed by Char) to explain the situation to the gang. It's been a while since I've been back.

"Who better to stand at Sir Haruto's side than I!" Flay's psyched to go.

"I want to join, too. I didn't get my fill of battling the other day." Liza's also surprisingly hawkish on the subject.

"Me too! I want to go!" Charlotte is jumping up and down, hands in the air. Adorbs.

"Then I, too, shall nominate myself. The thought of a brawl is rattling me with excitement. After all, I am bones."

"I'll go, too."

"Oh no, Johnny and Gigan, not you guys," I veto.

"Why not?!"

"Aw..."

They're way too obviously demons.

I guess I could hide Johnny in full body armor. But Gigan's size is

way too outlandish to disguise.

“You can’t come either, Char. It’s supposed to be a pretty dangerous place.”

Char wilts. Sad Char is adorable, too.

Hm? Usually, she'd protest a bit more... But whatever.

"Also, we'll be in an underground dungeon, so you guys won't be able to battle in your true forms, Flay and Liza."

Flay's one thing. But Liza the gigantic dragon might get buried underground.

"Even in human form, I will yield to no monster."

"I'll be fine, too."

Flay's combat skills are certifiable. And with Liza's magic, we can handle just about anything.

These two are essential.

"Do I have to go, too?" asks the boy who looks exactly like me.

He's been standing next to me the whole time looking bored. It's my copy, Haruto C.

"Obviously. You have to be there as Haruto Zenfis and contribute a decent amount to the team."

"As long as you're going to protect me, I guess we're good. I'm counting on you, me!"

He's fully relying on me to pull his weight. *He knows the objective, right?* I'm a little worried. He's me, after all.

"Four sounds like a good number for a party. And we'll have Professor Tear helping us remotely through communication magic. We're golden."

Now that I've selected my teammates...

The headmistress had asked me to introduce the members once I'm set. I (Haruto C) show up at her office with Flay, Liza, and Shiva (me) in tow.

"I'm afraid I can't allow demons."

Whaaaat?

But Flay and Liza both have their ears, horns, and tails hidden.

“I hear they’re both employed as servants by Count Zenfis. Although, strictly speaking, they are half-demons.”

Oh, right. I guess that info’s easily accessible to anyone who’s looking. So she screened me.

“I don’t know how their demon traits are being concealed, but I imagine the intent is to prevent unnecessary disturbance in human society. However□”

The headmistress squints her pretty eyes.

“□you weren’t intending to hide the fact from me, were you?”

Brrr! A chill runs down my spine.

Right. This woman is Ms. Zero Tolerance for Any Kind of Dishonesty.

Haruto C looks at me and whimpers, *What now?!* with his eyes.

I, in Shiva Mode, answer calmly, “Just as you speculated, I hid them to prevent unnecessary attention. I didn’t tell you earlier because... Uh, I just forgot.”

“Is that so? In that case, I will make no further mention of it. Let us return to the matter at hand.”

Without missing a beat, Haruto C starts yelling, “That’s discrimination towards demons! The war between humans and demons has long ended. See, this is why we still haven’t achieved world peace!”

Good one. Muddy the waters by babbling about broader subjects like ridding the world of prejudice that plagues our society.

“You’re painfully right.”

Ooh?! The headmistress looks disheartened.

“But social awareness isn’t something that can be changed

overnight. It'll be up to your generation to slowly, but surely, reform the people's mindset."

She smiles brightly for a second but quickly turns serious.

"In the current climate, receiving assistance from demons for the quest might draw objections. After all, there are demons who possess magic that can command beasts."

Meanwhile, we have Flay here, who uses her fists to control magical beasts.

"Even if your teachers and I approve, this is the Royal Academy. We also have to answer to the nobility."

I see. So, what she's saying is...

Everyone's attention is on me (Shiva).

Haruto C speaks up. "Then what about this unidentified man in black?"

"I'm afraid...he's bound to draw objections, too. We have no way of knowing that he's not a demon. On the other hand, if he's willing to reveal his identity and prove that he's human, I suppose there'd be no issue."

She can stare at me all she wants but I'm not revealing my identity. Also, why didn't she say so in the first place? Oh, right... Come to think of it, she did say there was "a condition."

Crap. My plan was to point fingers at her if she raised any objections. But her argument is so watertight, I'm at a loss.

"Well then," I propose. "Answer me this: if Haruto were to recruit Gold Zenfis or the Flash Princess to the party, wouldn't there be objections as well?"

"Why should there be? They've already failed once."

Geez, she's blunt. Kind of intimidating.

"In conclusion, I must ask you to redo your candidate search."

What else can I say? I send Flay and Liza home for now, while I

go off to...

“Save me, Super Teeeaaarrr!!”

...transform out of Shiva Mode and cry to Professor Tear.

“I see. After meeting with the headmistress, you went ahead without consulting with me, and this is how it ended.”

Professor Tear points her finger in my face.

“Well deserved!”

Hrrg...

“I’ll rub it in more later. Moving on. It’s a shame that you can’t use your Shiva card, but I’m not surprised. It’s proof that *that woman* already has her eye on you.”

“That woman?”

“The headmistress. She’s a dyed-in-the-wool educator. It’s no exaggeration to say that she’s pathologically obsessed with nurturing people. And ‘a problem child with high potential’ is her favorite treat.”

So she’s the obnoxious type who gets off on reforming juvenile delinquents and sending them forth to flourish in society.

“The most annoying part is that she has no self-awareness. She sincerely believes that you’ll rise to the occasion when faced with impossible tasks. And if you fail, she’ll be itching to take matters into her own hands by rehabilitating the poor runt. Horrible, right?”

I get the sense that she’s speaking from personal experience.

“I wish you told me earlier.”

“I did. I said, ‘Play the part of a serious, dedicated student.’ If you’d managed to do that, you might’ve avoided one-on-one tutoring with her even if you failed at the expedition in the ruins.”

“I was flawless!”

“Nah, I don’t believe you covered up your natural hopeless-dud

aura as well as you think you did.”

I guess it was a tall hurdle for a socially awkward guy like me. A losing battle from the start.

“Nonetheless, she has a high opinion of your abilities. If you pull off the task, she should leave you alone. I daresay you’d be able to complete this quest. Easily, even. You have a tendency to underestimate yourself. You’re better off not worrying about your mana level and such.”

I stopped caring about my mana level immediately after I was born.

“It’s just a treasure hunt. That seems doable enough.”

“The fact that you say it so casually frightens me... But never mind that. Your concern is that people will suspect you’re Shiva if you exhibit powers equivalent to his. Is that right?”

“I’m glad you get me.”

“Then why didn’t you come straight to me from the start...”
Professor Kiddy Glasses puffs her cheeks out and pouts.

I’m not one to get hung up on the past. Let’s leave it at that.

“There is a way. In fact, there’s only one way,” she attests.

Hmmm? I gaze at Professor Tear with eyes full of hope. Her cheeks turn a little red.

“Basically, you need a partner who’s even more talented than the Flash Princess.”

“Is there such a person?”

“Technically, no.”

Oh, for crying out loud! I’m about to groan... But something dawns on me.

“That’s right,” the professor nods. “Someone with tremendous hidden potential. Someone who can make everybody agree, ‘It’s no surprise she’s capable of doing this.’ I’m talking about...”

Before she finishes, I breathe the name aloud:

“Charlotte...”

Professor Tear knows Char’s max mana level.

It came out once when Weiss Owl was speaking to Professor Tear.

“But her max mana level is still unpublicized,” I say.

“It’s been revealed to a select few. To the royal family, of course, but also to the members of the nobility who support the king. The other factions are in the know too, albeit in the form of rumors. That sort of talk serves to rally the king’s supporters and deter his enemies. In terms of information warfare, it’s quite a clever tactic. Quite brilliant of Count Zenfis.”

It makes me giddy to hear my dad being praised.

She’s right, though. A few people do know Char’s max mana level.

“Wait... But, Professor Tear, you didn’t know until Char accidentally let it slip.” I thought her family supports the king. “Oh, yeah. You were disowned.”

“You don’t have to say it out loud.” Professor Tear sulks a little but quickly moves on. “In any case, the fact that she has great potential is bound to be disclosed. There shouldn’t be a problem in publicizing her talents now. Although it’ll veer slightly off course from the count’s strategy.”

I suppose she’s right.

But still... As her big brother, the last thing I want to do is expose my little sister to danger.

“And there you have it. I’ve laid the groundwork. Now it’s up to you to convince him, Charlotte.”

“Huh?”

Professor Tear grins. A flat, rectangular Barrier pops up next to

her.

‘Thank you so much, Professor Tear!’

My dear little sister appears on the screen.

“What’s going on?”

“The other day, Char and I had a good chat. She revealed to me that she’s Weiss Owl. I was moved by her trust in me, and in turn, I confessed to her that I’m aware of Shiva’s true identity.”

And that’s how the *Char and Professor Tear Alliance* was formed.

She continues, “Forming an expedition party was well anticipated. So I went ahead and made arrangements.”

Wow. Nothing gets by Professor Kiddy Glasses.

“Forget it, Char. You’ll get into all kinds of messes.”

‘I don’t mind, Brother Haruto. I’m willing to take on any challenge so you can focus on your research in Ancient Magic!’

All I’m trying to do is hide away in my room.

“Go ahead and tell him the truth, Charlotte,” Professor Tear alludes.

Charlotte gets fidgety on the screen.

‘Of course, what I just said is absolutely true. But also...I really want to go to school with you, Brother Haruto. Tee-hee-hee!’

Could she be any more adorable?

‘Even if there’s only the slightest possibility, I’ll do whatever it takes! In fact, I’ve already gotten Mother’s permission!’

She acts fast!

‘I had to keep so many things a secret and it was really painful, but in the end, Mother looked me firmly in the eye and said, “Don’t let this opportunity slip by,” □though I don’t really understand what she means by that.’

I don't know what she means by that either.

But if Mom's already caved, I can't imagine Dad would be able to stand in her way.

When our mom makes up her mind about something, she's tougher than the Flash Princess. Not in combat, I mean. But in terms of willpower.

"I imagine it'll put your parents' minds at ease. After all, a guy with godlike strength will be at her side," Professor Tear muses.

What guy? Me?

I feel like I'm being worn down into complying. But if we're going to make this happen, I'm gonna do everything in my power to protect her, and we'll show the world just how talented she is.

Honestly, Char is incredible—even though she herself isn't aware of it.

I (vaguely) remember my dad once saying that Charlotte has the potential to influence the kingdom—fit to be a ruler or something.

Someday, my sister will be the one who drives out that loser king and evil queen, and reign as the new queen of this kingdom.

This quest would make a suitable formal debut for her.

"All right. Let's do it."

'Yes!'

Going forward, my mission isn't just to hide away in my room. It's also to lay the groundwork for Char's ascension to the throne.

A perfect example of killing two birds with one stone.

Bonus Interlude:

Qualifications for Knighthood

From what I know, increasing your mana level isn't easy.

Not that I know anything about it since mine was already maxed out at birth. Even though it's only 2. Can we stop bringing this up?

The academy I go to is the kingdom's top school, but there's no official minimum mana level required for acceptance. (If there is, I wouldn't have to be here *sigh*.)

But the students' mana levels here tend to be in the double digits. They wouldn't be able to keep up in class otherwise.

That said, I just happened to get in with a special referral from the king. Aside from me, there's only one other student who was accepted with a low mana level of a mere 5.

Irisphilia *—* otherwise known as Iris.

In her case, she's really smart. On top of that, her max mana level is pretty high. Her strong potential for growth was also taken into consideration during her evaluation.

The lecture classes were never an issue for her. It was the practical magic classes that I noticed she's been struggling in.

The teachers here are kind and supportive, which is a different vibe from the school environment I'm familiar with. But I still see a few mean students picking on her for coming from a peasant background. Yeah, school sucks.

Anyway, that was a long introduction but the point is that she's a struggling student in many ways... Until now, that is. Iris is currently being flooded with attention like never before. And the reason for that is *—*

“Irisphilia!” Professor Tank Top shows off his toned muscles.

“Come, jump into my muscled bod□blrgh!”

She lands a punch straight into his beaming face.

The teacher goes flying.

Laius comes in from the side for a surprise attack. “Hyaaa!□oof!”
And also eats a fist that sends him hurling.

What kind of moron shouts “Hyaaa!” during a sneak attack? I snicker. By contrast, the other students are gawking wide-eyed in silence. The whole scene is pretty comical.

“Unbelievable speed. And force...” Laius wobbles to his feet. “Did your mana level seriously shoot up all of a sudden?”

The look on his face is full of disbelief, but why do I detect a twinge of delight? Is he the type who gets aroused from being smacked around?

By the way□we’re not in class right now. It’s after school.

They measured Iris’s mana level and confirmed that it had instantly soared to 23. All of a sudden, the school’s going wild.

Teachers and students who heard the rumors are coming from all sides, challenging her in mock battles to test her skills.

“Well, well! It was too much to just believe all at once, but now that she’s demonstrated her strength, we have no choice but to believe it! There’s no mistake. Your mana level did skyrocket!”

That’s what I’ve been saying.

Professor Tank Top points a finger at Iris. *I’ll allow the pointing, but could you knock it off with the flexing?*

Iris replies, “I still can’t believe it. I’m having a hard time getting the hang of my own enhancement spells.”

Sounds like a classic line for someone who’s recently unlocked their hidden powers to say.

I hear a burst of fanatical squealing directed at Iris. She dresses like a guy all the time so she’s super popular with the girls. As a

bonus, her breasts always look like they're gonna burst out of her jacket—plus, she has a pretty face—so she's got fans among the boys, too.

Not that I'm jealous or anything.

Anyway...

Not only is she the talk of the school...

“Irisphilia, may I speak with you? There is someone from the Royal Magical Research Center who'd like to meet you.”

...dignitaries from outside the academy have been dropping in to bombard her with questions.

Talking to strangers is basically the worst thing I can imagine, so I feel kinda guilty—I'm the reason Iris has to deal with all that.

“What are you talking about? I've made tremendous progress because of your help. I can't thank you enough!” she insists.

As far as I'm aware, I didn't do much.

At least I get bragging rights for “discovering” Iris. Not that I'll ever brag.

I'm sure the buzz will die down soon enough. *I'll be around chilling out*, I think to myself optimistically and eventually forget all about this event.



It's uncommon, but not unheard of for a “closed” mana level to suddenly “open.”

There have even been reports of people's mana levels rising by several points, although they're rare cases.

But there's no precedent for a mana level of 5—a commoner's level—to suddenly skyrocket by 18 points to a 23, the level of an elite.

“It's the fruits of your unflagging efforts,” Professor Tear told her.

That rings true. Iris has ceaselessly poured her blood, sweat, and tears into training.

But even so...

“I could never have done it on my own.”

Then what was the deciding factor?

She answers this question without hesitation:

“It’s thanks to Haruto.”

She doesn’t know specifically what he did or how he did it, and he hasn’t explained.

Embarrassingly enough, the best explanation she can offer was that “it happened with his guidance.”

And the part that pains her most of all is...

There’s nothing I can do to repay him...

Haruto doesn’t seem bothered by it—if anything, he’s been avoiding the topic. But even so, as a “human being,” Iris can’t live with the thought of not repaying a debt of gratitude.

“I think I can understand what you are lamenting about, Miss Iris.”

Charlotte appears out of nowhere.

“Did you illegally enter the academy again?”

“Oh! Am I breaking the law?!”

Flay—whose furry ears and tail are hidden—sets the petrified girl’s mind at ease.

“You’re family. You’re fine.”

Is that really how it works? Irisphilia is doubtful, but she decides to let it go.

“Eh-hem!” Charlotte clears her throat. “I have good news for you,

Miss Iris. Would you like to work with us to support Brother Haruto?"

On top of Charlotte's sudden appearance, her proposal is also a bolt from the blue. But if there's an opportunity to support Haruto, Irisphilia is all in.

"You already qualify. Your commitment to making Brother Haruto's greatness known to the world—I find it highly laudable!"

"But that's just you," retorts Flay. "The rest of us don't accept her. All she did was receive a boon from Sir Haruto that made her a little stronger."

"Please don't hold her to demon standards, Flay. I'm sure Miss Iris will only continue to get stronger and stronger!" Charlotte offers.

"Pardon me for interrupting," Iris says, "but when you speak of 'qualifying,' is this related to the 'knights' you sometimes refer to?"

The little girl nods enthusiastically.

"But aren't your activities committed to supporting Shiva from the shadows? What does that have to do with Haruto?"

Charlotte is flustered—it's all over her face.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'll stop prying. Since Flay is glaring at me..."

"I told you not to speak my name lightly!" The red-haired maid growls, baring her fangs.

Iris suppresses a chuckle.

Anyway.

Just as I suspected...

Haruto and Shiva are connected. There's a good chance they're the same person, but Iris will not pry. Just as she'd promised.

I'll continue to work on myself and wait for the day when Haruto decides to share his secret.

"So, what specifically do we do to support Haruto?" Iris asks.

"Allow me to explain..."

Charlotte's suggestion takes Iris by surprise...

The Olympius Ruins lie to the southeast of the capital, just under an hour's ride in a carriage going at top speed.

Through the woods, across the hills, between a valley, and beyond.

The decaying ruins are situated along a cliff.

Huge pillars worn down from wind and rain are towering all around us. Some are toppled over. Kind of has an Ancient Greece vibe.

Near the edge of the cliff looms a building that looks like a temple. At first glance, it stands out for its pristineness.

Beneath the temple is where the maze-like dungeon is.

A horse-drawn carriage was arranged to bring us to and back from the ruins. But now that we're here, I have no use for them. I politely decline the escort's offer to fetch us in the evening, and see the carriage off.

Now, I'd like to set up my Anywhere Door but□

"Why are *you* here?" I demand.

"Huh?"

Irisphilia looks at me as if to say, *You're asking me now?*

Yes. It's Iris.

She's wearing her usual black pantsuit outfit along with a pair of tough-looking gauntlets on her hands. There better not be any colorful gems to go with those.

There's no need to go into a *bloop-bloop-bloopity-bloop* flashback scene here.

Iris somehow found out that I was going on a quest to explore some ruins. From what I heard, she headed straight to Headmistress Theresia without even consulting me, and signed up.

When I brought Charlotte to meet the headmistress, she ambushed me with a nonnegotiable request: "Please welcome Iris into your party." Before I could object, Charlotte was springing with joy, and the rest is history.

"I was hoping that I could be of assistance but, am I actually...in the way?"

Yes. Yes, you are.

My little sister chimes in, "No, not at all! We're so grateful that you're here."

No, not at all. Char says so.

I wonder why my sister is so happy. She's in full magical girl mode, all fired up and ready to go.

I'm gonna need Char to contribute greatly to the expedition. But with Iris in tow, it'll be way trickier. So yeah, she's totally in the way.

But what can I do? It is what it is.

"For now, let's establish a transportation method."

I signal to Char with my eyes, who then waves her magic wand.

Char isn't actually conjuring any magic. I'm secretly using my Barrier magic to embed a door against one of the stone pillars.

"It didn't look like Charlotte used magic just now..."

"Really? I felt a breathtakingly beautiful flood of mana," I contest.

"O...kay?"

I can't get away with this baloney forever.

Iris doesn't seem like she'd be any good at lying. If we let her in on the truth, I'm pretty sure she wouldn't be able to deceive the

headmistress.

But manpower-wise, she's definitely not a burden.

Sure, she's not as great as Flay or Liza, but thanks to recent events, her mana level made a huge leap. And that put her at the top of the class—above Laius, even.

Her sudden improvement nearly turned the whole school upside down. But that's another story.

Having Iris join the expedition is probably convenient for Headmistress Theresia too. It's a perfect opportunity to gauge her abilities.

Actually, I'm kind of curious myself.

She'd make a nice guinea pig to try out some experiments on.

'Yoo-hoo! Can you hear me? Is the escort gone yet?'

The voice rings out of nowhere.

Ba-ding! A screen appears in the air, displaying Professor Kiddy Glasses's face.

Char answers, "Professor Tear, we look forward to your advice!"

'Leave it to me! I've familiarized myself with all of the records from past expeditions. Oddly, the distribution of monsters within the ruins hasn't changed since it was first discovered. If you can manage to evade them, you'll reach the deepest pit in no time at all.'

Just as Professor Tear is puffing out her flat chest and proudly babbling away—

Rrrrrrrumble...

—the ground beneath us trembles.

An earthquake? But it feels more like something large is moving under the surface...

The dirt swells up and forms a mound.

Suddenly, it bursts as if something exploded underground. Soil and rocks are flying everywhere.

Kyshaaaaww!

Um, something big just spawned?

It's long, caterpillar-shaped and has a round mouth like a lamprey eel. Countless rows of teeth churn inside its unhinged jaw as saliva oozes out. It sizzles when it drips to the ground. *Ew.*

Measuring just the part that's sticking out of the earth, the creature is more than sixty feet long. Being towered over by something like that is kind of unnerving.

“Brother Haruto! It's a giant monster!”

“Yeah. Exactly as it seems.”

I don't know what species it is. I've never seen anything like it in the count's fief.

It's huge. And gross.

Based on its appearance alone, it looks crazy strong. *But you know what?*

“I'll handle this one, Char.”

I do need her to rack up some big achievements on the expedition, but right now, it makes more sense if I take this one.

The expedition's main event is going to be inside the temple—deep in the underground labyrinth.

That's where the big monsters that even the Flash Princess's team struggled with are lurking.

We all know monsters that appear at the surface level tend to be pawns.

Despite this guy's size and appearance, I'm sure it's no tougher than a goblin. Not that I've ever fought a goblin.

Showing off Char's skills is important, but I need to score some points for myself, too.

Defeating some surface-level monster isn't going to be worth much. Which means this is my only chance to shine.

I pull my magic gun out of its holster.

Monsters like these often have a weakness in their most distinctive feature. I aim the gun at its giant mouth full of churning teeth.

How much force should I use? Enough to take out a goblin? Not that I know how tough a goblin is.

But sheesh. It is big.

A light shot should be enough to penetrate a mob. But I'm sure even a goblin wouldn't die from a prick on the nose. Maybe I should at least use enough force to blow its head off?

I pull the trigger.

At the same time, I conjure a spherical barrier six feet in diameter—making it look like an energy missile—and aim for the jaw of the ginormous creature.

A straight shot wouldn't make much of a spectacle, so I also create a bunch of magic circles in the air. Each time the missile passes through a circle, it changes course until finally, it torpedoes through the monster's head.

Ooh, dare I say that looks pretty cool!

The entire nib of the monster explodes and splatters.

Its titanic body crashes to the ground, spewing purple blood. *Seriously ew. Maybe I should've vaporized its whole body.*

“Welp, that thing wasn't as scary as it looked,” I say. “Anyway, moving on... Huh?”

When I turn around, Iris is gaping at me, stunned. *What's up?*

“Th-That was a Huge Rock-Eater! An extraordinarily large one,

too! And you defeated it in a single blast...?”

What? Is that a famous monster?

‘Since you don’t seem to know, allow me to explain,’ starts Professor Tear. “The Huge Rock-Eater is an extremely powerful monster that’s normally found near the labyrinth’s deepest vault. A solo fighter would typically need a mana level of at least 40 to kill a regular-sized one. Even the Flash Princess would have a tough time defeating it without the Divine Blade of Light—one of the seven sublime weapons.’

“It is? Then what was it doing up here on the surface?”

‘Beats me. Maybe it was just lost. Nevertheless, you wiped it out in a single move. I can only conclude that your powers are incalculable.’

Umm? Does that mean what I think it means?

“Amazing as always, Brother Haruto! That was incredible!”

Great. Once again, I botched my plan from square one.



A powerful monster that usually hangs out in the labyrinth’s deepest vault was above ground for some reason.

And there I go wiping it out with one hit.

“We’ll just have to say you killed that thing, Char.”

“But Brother Haruto! I couldn’t possibly take credit for your glorious victory.”

“I’m going to have to ask you to deal with it.”

All to win my freedom.

‘You can write whatever you want in your report. As long as you’re sure you can fool the headmistress.’

Right. I have to make sure Ms. Zero Tolerance for Any Kind of

Dishonesty doesn't detect any dishonesty.

I look around at my party members.

Char and Iris. And Professor Tear behind the screen.

Not exactly a team of smooth liars.

I'll think about it later. Right now, the expedition comes first.

I put off the problem for now and the three of us sally forth towards the building.

Unlike the crumbling pillars all around, the temple itself looks brand new.

'One of its wonders to this day is why it hasn't decayed over the years. It's speculated to be due to Ancient Magic.'

Ancient Magic sure is handy.

'Furthermore, the monsters that live inside don't support an ecosystem. They're a jumble of random species, including ones that would normally live in the forest or by the water.'

"How do they survive, then?"

'That's another wonder. It's possible that the ruins themselves are birthing the monsters and providing them with sustenance. They may look no different than the monsters we're familiar with, but we can surmise they're no ordinary creatures. The plus side is that they only roam within their designated territories, which makes them easier to deal with.'

"But we just saw a monster that's supposed to only be in the depths."

'And that is the biggest wonder. Such a phenomenon has never occurred since the discovery of the ruins. But hey, if you keep going, maybe you'll find a clue. Good luck with that.'

She says it so casually like it's not a problem. Oh, but I guess it's not *her* problem.

We enter the building and proceed down a shiny, elegant-looking passageway paved with material that reminds me of marble.

The tabular barrier in front of us displays a map.

The data is based on information that Professor Tear managed to obtain (probably illegally) from past expedition logs. Our current location is indicated by a blinking light.

“I’ve never seen this kind of magic,” Iris says.

“My little sister is pretty cool, huh?”

“You’re obviously the one controlling it, Haruto.”

“Let’s not get hung up on details. Char modded it so I can operate it, too, okay?”

“I’m not convinced...”

But I trust you’ll let it slide in due time. Nice to have friends I can count on.

“Oh! Make a right turn here...”

Leading the group, I turn the corner heedlessly...and immediately do an about-face.

“What’s the matter, Brother Haruto?”

“There’s something there.”

I press myself against the wall and peer around the corner.

There’s a knight clad in a suit of armor from head to foot.

He’s brandishing a sword at his side and carrying a huge shield. *Clang! Clang!* His armor clatters loudly as he paces the intersection back and forth.

‘What have we here? Ah, it’s a Wandering Knight. A type of undead monster. They’re basically a suit of armor brought to life by unresolved spirits. They’re empty inside.’

“Is it stronger or weaker than a goblin?”

My first impulse is to compare it to a weak-sounding monster. Even though I’ve never actually come across a goblin.

‘Hahaha! What a funny question. It’s a tough enemy—you’d need a mana level of 30 at least to defeat one by yourself. And they’re rarely found alone. These guys usually move in teams of four or five. That one must be a scout.’

“Gotcha. Uh, speaking of which, is that thing looking right at me?”

‘Yup. It definitely sees you.’

The knight in armor raises its sword and roars.

“This is bad! It’s trying to call for backup,” Iris says.

She takes a leap forward and dashes at it with incredible speed, springing from the floor to the wall, and latching onto the ceiling. She then dives straight down.

“Hyaaa!”

The knight is so overwhelmed by her agility that it has no time to react. Iris pounds her glowing fist straight into its head, crushing its helmet in.

The light emitting from Iris’s fist envelops the knight’s whole body. The monster lets out a wail of agony as it collapses to the floor.

‘Whoa, amazing. She’s always had exceptional physical combat skills, but with the advantage of a surprise attack, she was able to overcome the difference in mana levels. And she even planted the enemy’s contrasting element—Light magic—to obliterate it. Truly the work of an EX-Rank.’

I’m the one who discovered Iris’s talents. I wanna say it so bad.

‘Still... Hmm,’ the professor mutters.

“Is something bothering you?”

‘It’s just...the way she fights. We humans are physically more vulnerable than demons. Naturally, we don’t engage in fist fights unless we’re in extreme situations like getting disarmed. This is all basic knowledge, Haruto.’

I didn't know that. Oh, wait—maybe I heard about it in our martial arts class?

'The way she fights... How should I put it? It's like that of a demon. Humans wouldn't make the kinds of choices she made.'

"To each their own, I guess."

I don't really care one way or the other.

However, I *am* concerned why Iris is running towards us pale-faced.

"Its backup is here!"

Shoot. The monster managed to call them.

"Looks like there are a lot," I observe.

They're flocking in from three out of the four intersecting passageways. There's gotta be way more than four or five soldiers.

'There must've been a bunch of squads nearby. I'd say there are close to thirty in total.'

Iris managed to take one down with a surprise attack, but thirty is just way too many.

Char and I join Iris and make a break for it.

Clang, clang! The gang of armors rattles after us.

'This is officially getting bizarre. Why would you encounter such tough enemies at such a preliminary stage?'

"All we've been encountering are super tough enemies."

'Exactly my point. It's too soon to be certain, but it makes me wonder if someone set this up.'

Iris is the first to respond to Professor Tear's question.

"I'd imagine the first suspect would be the person who assigned us this dangerous quest."

'I wonder. Still, for better or for worse, she's a woman of justice. The test is quite demanding to begin with. I can't imagine she'd take it further and demand the impossible.'

Professor Tear continues with a grave expression. ‘Besides that, these ruins exceed the bounds of human understanding. I can’t imagine the headmistress would have the power to command what monsters spawn where. The only possibility I can think of is...’

“A devil?” I ask.

Professor Tear nods. Iris, who’s running alongside me, widens her eyes as if she’s surprised.

‘You haven’t heard about them yet, have you, Iris. There were devils involved in the recent upheaval in the capital. We can’t ignore the possibility that some surviving elements have their eyes on us and are trying to meddle.’

I did let one of them escape.

It’s impossible to know right now. But if we continue our expedition, we may encounter the culprit.

“It’s kinda hard to run and talk. We should do something about those things behind us.”

“You guys are flying, not running,” Iris points out.

Running is too much work.

“Char, take care of them.”

“Yes, Brother Haruto!”

Char spins around. She waves her magic wand as she leaps backwards.

Masses of glowing orbs shoot out of her wand.

I envelop them in barriers and amplify their speed and power.

The orbs blast through the armored knights, decimating them in the blink of an eye.

“How did she defeat all those Wandering Knights as if it were nothing at all...”

‘For your own mental health, Iris, I suggest you just accept things as they are.’

This is getting to be way too much work.

I’m considering reporting to the headmistress that there weren’t any monsters or whatever. I mean, something unusual *is* going on in the ruins.

“All right. Let’s keep going.”

I’m in a hurry to grab the goods so I can get on with my life as a shut-in.

Meanwhile...

“Yippee! Collaborating with Brother Haruto. This is the greatest thing ever!”

Gosh, I’m flattered. She’s making me blush, I think to myself.



In the middle of a dimly lit room, a crystalline globe about seven feet in diameter is floating in the air.

Several bands of magic circles are slowly spinning around the pale blue glowing crystal.

The walls, floor, and ceiling are covered with writings in Ancient Language. In the corner of the room, she sits with her arms around her knees. A single black wing sprouts from her back.

Melcuemenes, the pure-blooded devil spawned by the Devil Lord.

But she’s broken.

Her mission was to keep herself alive for the reincarnation of the Devil Lord Lucifyra.

Serving as the vessel for her master to descend upon—literally

sacrificing her body□was her only role.

But due to an encounter with a being who possesses godlike powers, her core function to serve as a vessel had been destroyed.

The girl who specializes in survival had, ironically, lost her “reason to live.”

And yet, a fragment of “the reason she was born” remains.

Keeping herself hidden far, far away where Shiva would never find her is what she *should* be doing□but her *raison d’etre* stands in the way.

To keep herself alive for the resurrection of the Devil Lord.

For that reason, she cannot leave the kingdom.

Although, she does believe she chose the perfect hiding place.

The furthest depths of the ruins were impossible for even the Flash Princess and the royal knights to penetrate.

Melcuemenes had seized control of its operation.

By utilizing ley lines and her own mana, she’s able to produce and deploy powerful monsters. She knows these powers are meaningless against *him*, but it should be enough to buy her time.

Besides, he has no business here.

“What could a person of such great powers possibly seek in a decrepit ruin?”

Broken and defeated, her mind refuses to entertain the worst possible scenario.

As a result...

The little devil curled up in the corner suddenly flinches. A sense of terror rushes up her spine.

A beat later, the temple detects an intruder.

She raises her head just as a square screen appears next to the great crystal. Communication magic, one of the long-lost intricate

spells of Ancient Magic. Not only does it transmit sound, but it also displays moving images.

The screen displays a view of the ground above.

A blonde little girl in a frilly pink costume, a girl dressed in masculine clothes, and a boy with black hair.

The trio sees off the horse and carriage. After they talk for a few minutes...

“What?!”

The little pink girl waves a strange stick and a door appears out of nowhere.

Communication magic cannot relay mana, but this is, without a doubt, a magic spell.

Creation magic? No, that's impossible. Storage magic? But that's one of the most advanced Ancient Magic spells lost eons ago.

Then what did she do?

“No... It wasn't her. The one who conjured it is...that boy with black hair.”

Melcuemenes can detect the boy's overwhelming mana from afar—not through the screen, but with her own heightened senses.

I know this feeling.

Beyond a doubt. This mana belongs to the Black Knight.

Which means this boy is the Black Knight.

But what's he doing here?

“Is he...after me?”

Fear washes over.

Frantic to do away with the visitors, she sends out a Huge Rock-Eater. Her state of panic leaves her no room to pause and adjust its stats; she creates the most powerful version of the beast.

But the monster is vanquished by a magic missile ejected from the boy's unusual weapon.

“In one blow...?!”

The little devil then unleashes a throng of Wandering Knights in the uppermost level of the dungeon's labyrinth. Once again, the black-haired boy defeats the monsters effortlessly.

“Wh-What...? What is he after?”

She can't comprehend why he's being accompanied by a young woman and a little girl whose powers are inferior to his by a mile, or why he isn't in “Black Knight” form.

What's his objective?

Melcuemenes wants to know, but she's too terrified to get close enough to investigate.

“Is he after...me?”

Just the idea of it is sheer horror, but it's not something she can brush off.

The dungeon only has one exit.

If they lose their way in the labyrinth, maybe she can slip by them. But the group is headed straight towards the deeper levels. It's hard to believe he hasn't detected her presence. They're bound to face off sooner or later.

"His objective... Right. First, I must learn his objective..."

Consumed by paranoia, Melcuemenes continues to send a barrage of powerful monsters without any regard for her dwindling mana.

She observes his expressions and the movements of his mouth carefully, and finally, she finds a clue.

"He's searching for something..."

If he finds what he's after, might he leave this place without noticing her?

But she doesn't know what he's looking for.

What could such a powerful being possibly be seeking in this crumbling labyrinth?

"Wh-What's this now?" the devil mutters.

The trio is cooking a meal as if they don't have a care in the world.

The boy preps the raw ingredients and fires up a brick oven that seemingly popped out of nowhere. All while inside the dungeon.

The masc-dressed girl is gaping at him in astonishment, but the little girl seems utterly unfazed by this.

None of it makes sense.

And because it doesn't make sense, it terrifies her.

Once the mealtime is over, they continue to bulldoze through their dungeon expedition.

The boy was hesitant at first, but by now, he's confidently blasting away magical bullets at the enemies with his eccentric weapon.

He seems bored, even.

As breezily as brushing away flies, he contends with the monsters that even the kingdom's elite fighters—the heroes who vanquished the Demon King—struggled with.

There's no room to proceed with caution anymore.

Melcuemenes rashly pours her mana into the crystal orb, praying that the monsters will deter the party's advance even just a little.

But in no time at all, the group reaches the dungeon's twentieth level.

They're a third of the way to the deepest vault.

It's over.

No matter what she does, there's no way around it. At this rate, they're bound to reach her location. It's only a matter of time.

Melcuemenes resigns herself to despair. Just then...

“Another one...?!”

The boy produces another door. (Again, making it look like it's the little girl's work.)

He opens the door and they pass through it.

Ka-cham! The door latches shut. All three of them are gone.

“Teleportation magic?”

It's completely different from the kind Melcuemenes is familiar with, but given the clues, it's the only possible explanation.

If that's the case, now would be her chance to escape the dungeon.

However, she doesn't have any mana left to do so...



This is really random, but I'd made one of my dreams come true.

It happened a while ago. I came to my breaking point and after what seemed like endless experimenting, I finally managed to produce

the black liquid I so yearned for.

The cherished substance no Japanese person can live without.

That's right. Soy sauce!

I even made a classic soy sauce dispenser out of a barrier. I was also able to make miso paste.

I grated up the closest thing this world has to a daikon radish, added soy sauce, vinegar, a squeeze of citrus fruit, and some sweetener. And voila! Oroshi ponzu sauce.

And here we are, at the end of our first day on the expedition, gathered in Professor Tear's lab having a yakiniku barbeque party.

"This sauce is refreshing and delicious ♪"

"It is," Iris nods. "I've never tasted anything like it, but it's good. How does this iron pan work? It would appear to be some sort of Fire magic..."

Iris glances towards Flay who's busy serving the food.

"Hah! Not my doing. If you were to leave it to me, I'd burn this meat to a crisp!"

That's not a brag.

Liza, also serving the food, mumbles to herself, "When lightning travels through metal, it produces something called a magnetic force. The spiral shaped magnetic force-making device creates a powerful magnetic field, which the metal then..."

To stave off her phobia of things she can't comprehend, I recited to her what I found on the internet.

But this isn't an electric hot plate.

I just conjured a hot plate out of a barrier that heats on my command.

"Eat some veggies too, not just meat! It's important to have a balanced diet!" urges Polkos, who's here for some reason even though he's been no help at all.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Growing children need to eat meat. In fact, everyone needs meat, first and foremost, and always.”

Flay ignores Polkos and continues to toss meat onto the grill.

“You and Liza should eat too, you know,” I tell them.

“With great pleasure.”

“Thank you, Sir Haruto.”

Liza sits down next to Char and timidly reaches for the food with her chopsticks. She’s mostly an herbivore, so she just goes for the vegetables. Recently, though, sweet snacks have been becoming her main food source.

Flay’s already wolfing down the meat. She’s not shy at all.

By the way, Processor Tear’s not with us. Right now, she’s probably□oh. Here she is.

WHAM! The door flies open.

“You started without me? No fair!”

“Welcome back. How was the meeting with Headmistress Theresia?”

“You left all the chores to me because you’re so afraid of her catching your lies, and this is how you treat me? Hmph! I’m not telling you.”

She’s visibly upset.

If Professor Tear made it back unscathed, I assume she succeeded. Looks like she managed to get away with a vague report like, “Didn’t see any monsters, tee-hee ♪” (Paraphrased.)

Of course, all evidence that would suggest otherwise has been erased. Not a speck of the dead gigantic monsters left at the site.

“You’d better have saved me some of that meat.”

“Right here.”

I grab a block of meat from under my chair. (But really, I’m pulling it out of mystery space-time.)

The meat is top quality beef from my dad's land. Rich, marbled meat from cows raised using Japanese Wagyu beef-breeding techniques.

Liza slices the meat and cooks it on the iron plate.

Fwoo! Fwoo! Professor Tears blows before taking a bite. "Mmm! This is pretty good ♪"

Is she cooling down a bit?

"So, how did it go?"

"Hm? Oh, I managed all right. The headmistress did seem a bit suspicious, though. But when I told her that a third party might be involved in the ruins, and that you'll check it out while you're there, she seemed satisfied."

"You said *what?*"

"To get a person to believe a lie, you have to mix in a certain amount of truth. Although, it's still a pretty lousy lie since it's only based on speculation. Which means you won't be able to get away with a half-assed investigation. You'll have to demonstrate that you made an effort."

An investigation, you say?

Sitting here and eating aren't the only things I've been doing.

I want to get through this expedition as quickly as possible so I can pursue my ideal life as a shut-in at the academy.

The map of the dungeon that Professor Tear gave us is incomplete. It doesn't show the labyrinth's deepest vault, nor does it show us how to get there.

My assignment is to find and retrieve one of the seven sublime weapons—which is thought to be in the dungeon. Reaching the labyrinth's deepest vault isn't the mission.

The sooner we can find the sword or spear or armor, the better. So I'd sent a bunch of surveillance barriers out to scout around.

Still though, the place is really big. I haven't found anything yet, but... *Huh?*

I signal to Liza with a glance, and she swiftly sneaks up behind Polkos.

"Augh?" Polkos exclaims. "What's this about, Liza? I can't eat with your hands over my eyes."

Can't be bothered to explain my communication magic to him right now.

I conjure a tabular barrier in the air and display the inside of the ruins.

"Professor Tear, what is this?"

Nom nom nom, ulp! "What do you mean, 'What is this?' Seems obvious that it's a little girl."

Yes. A little girl. Wandering around deep in the dungeon.

She appears to be about seven or eight years old.

Her skin is dark, and she has neatly cropped shoulder-length white hair. Her eyes are red but they seem vacant. Is she wearing a tank top□an undershirt of this world□for adults? It reaches down to her knees.

I feel like I've seen her before. But never mind that for now.

"What's a child doing in a place like that?"

"She wandered off and got lost?"

That seems highly unlikely.

Char stares intently at the child.

"You don't suppose she's the cause of all the trouble at the ruins... Do you?"

My little sister's sweet, round eyes are wavering like she doesn't want to believe it to be the case.

"Well, let's find out."

I mentally command a target mark to appear on the little girl

behind the screen. *Bee-beep!* A line extends from the bullseye symbol and connects to a square frame. Words are displayed inside the square.

“Hmm. Her mana level’s a 3 out of 6.”

Professor Tear wrinkles her brow.

“She only has one elemental affinity. Chaos□that’s unusual among humans. Also, her auxiliary affinities all have positive effects, and she’s got seven of them. Quite an irregularity.”

“But in terms of mana level, she’s nothing special, right?”

“That’s right. I can’t imagine this child wielding enough power to cause trouble in the ruins. In which case, perhaps she was abducted by whoever is manipulating the ruins, and she’d escaped from whatever ritual they were about to perform.”

“What do you mean, ‘ritual’?”

“Put bluntly, a human sacrifice.”

Wow. That’s a pretty dark and heavy answer.

“Oh. She collapsed.”

The child is now lying face down as if she blacked out from exhaustion.

“Oh, no! Someone must go and save her!” Iris exclaims.

“Who?”

She glares at me, *You, who else?*

Okay, okay, I’ll go.

I stand up reluctantly and head for my private room at the lab. I go to the ruins through the Anywhere Door...

...and bring her back with me.

The little girl wakes up, and the instant she sees us, she starts trembling like a leaf.

I console her, “There’s no need to be afraid,” but all she does is

curl up into a ball. She doesn't try to retaliate or anything.

"Will you tell us your name?" Char asks gently.

"...Mel□....."

I think she said something after "Mel," but we couldn't catch it. We'll call her Mel for now.

The girl's probably been through some scary stuff. We should wait for her to calm down before asking her questions.

Her tummy makes a cute rumbling sound, so we feed her some yakiniku.



Melcuemenes couldn't sleep a single wink.

After eating, the small woman with the glasses□apparently, she's called Tearietta□followed her around, gave her a bath, and tucked her into bed. Even in bed, the woman was hugging her like a teddy bear the whole time.

Right now, Melcuemenes must recharge her near-depleted mana... But it's not something sleep can fix.

She poured too much of her energy into the ruin's control instrument, and doing so had damaged her "core."

To replenish her mana, she must drain it out from someone else.

Humans are feeble and won't be much of a supply source, but if Melcuemenes devours Tearietta, whose defense is wide open, she might be able to absorb just enough to escape this place.

However, the little devil is unable to put the plan in motion.

For one thing, Haruto Zenfis is here under the same roof. Haruto is Shiva, the Black Knight. There's no doubt.

If Melcuemenes inflicts any harm on a friend of Haruto's, she'll be in immediate danger.

She's already frantic with worry that he'll recognize her and harm her.

But finally... Finally...

He steps out. From what she's overheard, he's headed to the Olympius Ruins.

The beast-like female demon and the dragon clan-ish girl are gone, too.

She's all alone with Tearietta, whose back is turned—completely vulnerable.

Melcuemenes is sitting on the sofa, laughing up her sleeve.

This is the perfect chance. Just as she's thinking that...

"All right, guys! Another day of hard work ahead."

'We're the ones doing most of the hard work.'

He appears on a screen in front of Tearietta.

Communication magic? But this one doesn't seem to utilize a large-scale spell...

Also, despite Haruto only setting out a few minutes ago, the walls behind him are unquestionably those of the underground dungeon.

Are they already at the site? Is he capable of teleportation magic as well?

Come to think of it, when he set out after breakfast, he headed for his room. That must be where his teleportation portal is.

If so, he can come straight back here the moment anything happens to Tearietta.

It'd be impossible to attack her after all.

They cannot sustain communication magic for long. As soon as it lapses, I'll...

But no matter how long she waits, Haruto doesn't disappear from the screen in front of Tearietta.

They chitchat endlessly about trivial things like what's on the

menu for lunch.

Their communication magic is simplified to the highest degree. Even so, it must consume tremendous mana. Is this man...truly...a god?

She cannot imagine why such a being is pretending to be a school student.

If only I knew his objective...

...she might be able to plan a countermeasure.

Melcuemenes had poured the last drops of her mana into the instrument that controls the labyrinth. In order to protect herself, she arranged hordes of ferocious creatures in the deepest reaches of the dungeon.

After Haruto disappeared, she attempted to flee the ruins, only to run out of strength along the way□and now she's ended up here.

But the dungeon's deepest vault is still crawling with monsters.

If she can lead Haruto and the gang there, he'll have to face the beasts.

He'll be too busy battling to pay attention to Tearietta.

And that'll be the perfect moment for Melcuemenes to escape...

If they continue to go deeper and deeper, they'll eventually reach the deepest level...

In which case, all she has to do is keep quiet.

Heh, hehehe!

She lets out a stifled cackle.

"Hmm?" Tearietta looks over.

The little devil quickly straightens her face. The professor tilts her head and returns to the screen.

Melcuemenes breathes a sigh of relief.

But wait. They're in the dungeon to look for something...

She doesn't know what the object is. She's merely gathered that fact based on observation.

If the object they're searching for isn't in the deepest level, their encounter with the monsters will never happen.

Ngh... Ghhh...

Without realizing, she starts grinding her teeth.

"Hm? What is it, Mel?" Tearietta turns around again.

Quickly, the devil drops her gaze and falls silent.

The woman seems suspicious, but she doesn't press the matter.

Dropping her shoulders in relief, Melcuemenes focuses her attention on Haruto and company as she seeks out a solution.

And then...

"It certainly is peaceful. We haven't seen any monsters today."

'There aren't any.'

"Eh?"

'I did a quick scan last night, too. There are no signs of any monsters all the way down to the fiftieth level, and there don't seem to be any below that, either.'

"Really? Then you might as well head all the way down."

'Let's not be forgettin' what we're really here for, missy.'

"What's with the act? But you're right. All you're tasked with is to retrieve one of the sacred weapons. Still, don't you think it'll be in the deepest part?"

By sacred weapons, she must be referring to the seven sublime weapons, which are rumored to be scattered all around the world.

Of the seven, two are only hinted at in ancient texts; nobody even knows what they look like. One of these mystery weapons is said to be hidden in the Olympius Ruins.

This is my chance!

If the item Haruto is searching for is in the dungeon's deepest vault, he's surely headed that way.

"Sacred weapon... You mean..." she breathes, trying to sound

frail.

She played the part of a maid for so long. *I'll show you I can play a vulnerable young girl, too!*

“Ah-haha! No way! You crack me up!” howls the spectacled woman.

Listen!

They've slipped back into lolling about in meaningless chatter.

“Um... The sacred weapon you mentioned... Do you mean...”

Melcuemenes speaks a little bit louder this time.

“You're kinda clueless when it comes to that stuff, Haruto!”

‘Brother Haruto doesn't bother himself with such trivialities.’

They don't even notice!

The little devil is this close to yelling. But if she acts too bold, her façade won't be as convincing anymore.

She'll have to wait for the right moment.

They still haven't even reached the thirtieth level.

It's too early to worry, she thinks as she takes some quiet deep breaths.

But he just said that there are no monsters even down in the fiftieth level... How can he tell so far ahead?

A chill darts up her spine.

‘Hmm? There's a whole bunch of monsters in this layer.’

“Where?”

‘Around the sixtieth level. I've searched every inch but there doesn't seem to be a staircase that goes down to it.’

He can use scoping magic, too? Melcuemenes is completely horror-struck.

‘Looks like a hassle. There is one weird-looking room, but the loot we're searching for isn't there. There's no point in going.’

The devil girl collapses on the sofa.



Around noon, we pop back to Professor Tear's lab.

Not because I got tired of the expedition. I mean, yeah, I'm over it, but there's another reason: lunch!

Eating deep down in a dungeon has a sort of camping vibe to it. As a shut-in, I'm not into that scene.

To me, being in my cozy room darkened with blackout curtains—the only source of light being my computer monitor—and scarfing down on delivery pizza (that my parents answered the door for) is the definition of pure bliss.

But we're in an alternate universe. I can't set my expectations too high.

At any rate, we're here gathered around a hot pot. It's one of those stews with a bit of everything in it—the main features are white fish, and chicken meatballs.

“Yay! I've seen this a lot in anime!” Charlotte's eyes are glimmering with delight.

“Why are we eating a steaming hot dish at this time of year? It's almost summer.” Iris is baffled.

“Don't worry, Iris. Liza will cool down the room.”

Liza had been busy at Count Zenfis's castle for an errand, but I invited her over. Chilly air starts to fill the room.

“Now if only we had a kotatsu, everything would be perfect ♪” says Char.

“A 'kotatsu'?”

“It's a heating appliance from a certain country. You put a blanket over a table and warm up the inside with a heater. A tabletop goes over it. So while you're eating a meal, your legs are nice and cozy. It's

like something out of a dream.”

“Again, it’s almost summer—never mind.” Iris seems to be adapting. It’s a good trend.

“By the way, Professor Tear... Where’s Polkos?”

“He’s busy with classes and errands. I don’t think we’ll see him today.”

Unlike you, who seems to have nothing but free time, I almost say aloud. But I hold it back. It’s called kindness.

“In that case, we can get things done right here.”

Frankly, I’m getting tired of exploring the ruins. The circumstances have changed a lot and it seems kinda pointless to go all the way there to investigate.

As steam rises from the pot, I conjure a bunch of tabular barriers. They’re all connected to the surveillance barriers I’ve spread throughout the ruins.

This way, I’ll be able to conduct a thorough investigation without going out.

“There goes Haruto doing unbelievable things again...” Iris reacts dryly.

Good. It’ll only be a matter of time before you’re fully accepted as a member of Camelot.

Come to think of it, there is a kid here who doesn’t know about my Barrier magic.

“Is she going to be okay?” I ask Professor Tear.

“The little one collapsed all of a sudden,” she reports. “She doesn’t seem to have a fever, and her breathing is just fine. I don’t think we need to worry.”

Maybe she’s still disoriented from her traumatic experience?

What happened to her in that ruin, and who did it?

Oh well. She’s just a child and there’s no light in her red eyes.

Deceiving her shouldn't be that hard.

I continue to poke around in the hot pot as I monitor over a hundred screens floating all around me.

Our goal is to find one of the seven sublime weapons rumored to be hidden somewhere in the ruins.

“Professor Tear, there's something that's been on my mind...”

“Hmf? Whaffhat?” the professor asks with a mouth full of chicken meatballs.

It's been bothering me for a while.

An extremely important and a pretty rudimentary question:

“Is there really a sacred weapon somewhere in the ruins?”

How can we be sure the thing exists when nobody even knows what it looks like? Has anyone ever seen it? I mean if they did, they'd probably take it home.

“Gee, who knows.” She tilts her head.

Wha... Acting cutesy does not help.

Nom, nom, gulp! Professor Tear launches into an explanation.

“The only evidence is in an old manuscript. A record kept by an adventurer who journeyed to the dungeon's deepest vault a very long time ago.”

“Wow. Sounds like there were some incredible people back then.”

“His name was Granfelt.”

I've heard that name somewhere before. Who was he again?

“But the manuscript is so worn that it's full of holes chewed by insects. Some of the pages are torn and missing. So even though it says that he discovered one of the sacred weapons, we can't confirm what sort of weapon it was.”

“Didn't he take it with him?”

“Apparently not. If he had, it would’ve been stored in the proper place and safeguarded by the appropriate personnel.”

“Yeah, but still...”

“Since you don’t seem to recognize the name, let me explain. We’re talking about the great sage Granfelt here. He’s the one who discovered and brought back all the sacred weapons that are confirmed today. Including the Flash Princess’s Divine Blade of Light.”

“But...”

“Oh, the mysterious third party who’s been exploiting the Olympius Ruins? Given the circumstances, it’s very likely that they fled the area last night. It’s possible they may have even taken the sacred weapon with them.”

Professor Tear continues assuredly, “However, if the weapon was in the labyrinth, there’s got to be evidence of it. Finding that evidence would be enough to pass the test. The headmistress wouldn’t insist you chase down whoever took off with it.”

Oh. In that case, fine.

“Would this be evidence?”

Vwoosh! I send one of the tabular barriers over to Professor Tear.

“Huh. I see a golem-type monster wandering around. Is this the deepest vault?”

“Behind him.”

Hmm? Professor Tear squints through her spectacles.

“An unnatural indentation in the wall... And there’s something there. A pedestal? It’s quite worn down so it’s hard to make it out—huh? How is it possible that just this area is worn?”

The ruins are protected by a barrier that prevents degradation. It’s peculiar that there are signs of deterioration in this one nook.

“Now, if we zoom in here...”

You can barely make out what appears to be writings on the

pedestal.

“Ancient Language,” she points out. “It’s blurry and hard to read but it says...”

As Professor Tear trails off, Iris finishes her sentence.

“It says, ‘That which gouges the ravaged earth, that which pierces through the enchanted castle walls.’ It looks like there was more, but it’s no longer legible.”

You can read Ancient Language, Iris?

“Then it must be some sort of giant stake? If so, that means...”

“A fantasy weapon?!” Char shouts excitedly.

“Well, it certainly seems to describe the characteristics of a sacred weapon. Which means...”

Reassured by Professor Tear’s grin, I announce, “Mission accomplished!”

Wow, that was surprisingly easy. Just as I start to celebrate my bright future...

The golem that was trudging back and forth suddenly stops and, for some reason, stares straight at the nook where the weapon was supposedly displayed. And then, yet again for some reason, he raises his arms up...

...and smashes them down, crushing the pedestal!

“What the hell is it doing?!” wails Tear.

“How should I know?”

I guess he was having a bad day? And decided to take it out on the pedestal? Well, isn’t that just great for us.

“Now what?!” the professor bawls.

No time to be kidding around anymore.

The pedestal was literally the only proof we had that the sacred

weapon existed there and that it had been taken by someone. And now that's all crumbled to dust.

In that case...

"If there is no sacred weapon, why not make one?"

I finally voice the sneaky plan I've been hiding up my sleeve from the start.



In order to earn a life of freedom at the academy, I'm supposed to find some crazy sacred weapon or something.

However, it looks like someone's already grabbed the goodie and the only proof of its existence has just been destroyed.

I'm in a pinch. But I'm not panicking. Because I had a backup plan all along.

"If there is no sacred weapon, why not make one?"

While everyone else looks at me with disdain, my little sister gazes up at me with stars in her eyes.

She bubbles, "Based on the inscription on the pedestal, the weapon is powerful enough to destroy a castle wall in one hit. It also mentions gouging the earth. I bet it's a fantasy weapon that could even obliterate a giant pyramid!"

"Isn't that too big?"

I'd at least like to be able to carry it on my back.

Professor Tear interjects as if to temper Char's enthusiasm. "Based on the size of the pedestal, a large-scale weapon like a battering ram doesn't seem realistic. If we want to deceive the headmistress, we'll need to bring her something of a believable size."

Before I could say something to try to cheer up my dejected sister, Iris beats me to it□

“But Professor Tear, penetrating a castle wall□even an ordinary one□in a single motion would require incredible force. There’s a limit to the materials and magic spells that can be endowed in a handheld weapon. What you’re saying is we basically have to create something equivalent to the sacred weapons.”

□but her attempt is so bad. I’d give her a failing grade.

“Iris, you really don’t get it, do you?” I rib.

“Hmph. What do you mean by that?”

I notice the twinkle return in Char’s eyes. Her gaze says, *Yes, it should be a giant-sized weapon!*

But that’s not it.

The answer that Char’s subconscious truly longs for is...

“Look, size isn’t what makes something a fantasy weapon. The important thing is whether it sparks your heart with joy.”

“I...see?” Char isn’t quite seeing it yet.

“For example, take Dad’s warhammer, right? If you saw a little girl like you swinging that thing around and smashing up monsters, how would you feel?”

“I’d feel a little bad for the monsters...”

“Uh, yeah, that’s true. Monsters are just trying to live their best lives too, I suppose. We wouldn’t hurt them unless there’s good reason to. All right... Imagine an evil organization is barricaded in a castle and you need to smash a big hole in it.”

Char closes her eyes for a few moments.

“My heart is sparking with joy!”

“That’s it!”

“What on earth are the two of you talking about?” Iris sounds depleted.

But I ignore her. As long as Char gets it, that's good enough for me.

"So basically, we need a weapon of reasonable size, yet powerful enough to demolish a castle wall."

"That's why I said it wouldn't be easy..." Iris protests.

Nah. We've got the specs. It should be easy.

"Something with enough force to smash through a castle wall, but no bigger than Dad's warhammer. As for its form... I think first instinct is important, so let's go with something like a 'stake'. That way, it won't overlap with other sacred weapons."

"A pile bunker!"

How does she know such a niche weapon? Probably from some anime. Well, if she already knows what that is...

"Wanna try designing it?"

Char's eyes light up and she begins to doodle on a sheet of paper.

Professor Tear peers over her shoulder and comments on this and that. "Lugging multiple spears on your back? Aren't they a bit too long? They look close to seven feet."

"If they're too short and thin, they won't look like they'll be any good for raiding a castle."

"Is it necessary to make it look so obvious, though? In any case, setting them up onto the arm contraption is gonna be a hassle□oh! I see. They're going to auto-load from your back. But the mechanism seems awfully complicated. I mean, how would you load them?"

"Robot arms are a fantasy item. They make my heart buzz with joy. The mechanism can be powered with magic or something to make it go *k-chack* into place."

"If it's going to be powered by magic, maybe it doesn't need all those complex-looking contraptions..."

That's part of what makes it a fantasy weapon. Please understand.

“How do you launch the spears? Some sort of crossbow apparatus? Then you’ll need a bow...”

“With magical powers that go *va-voom!*”

“So you’ll add a spell for that, too? I guess that’s part of the fantasy factor?”

The brainwashing is working. But Professor Tear already seemed like the type who’d indulge in fantastical ideas.

Not everyone’s having an easy time getting on board, though.

“I can’t imagine the materials and magic spells necessary to bring such an instrument to life...” Iris clutches her head.

Oh, and there’s one other person whose eyes are getting shifty.

“Sir Haruto will make it work somehow... Even though none of it makes any sense...”

Liza still hasn’t gotten used to the whole thing.

“Finished!” Char proudly holds up the sheet of paper.

It’s a drawing of a little magical-ish girl. On one arm, she’s wearing a small shield that looks like a buckler, except it’s longer and it’s shaped like a plank. She’s got four spears on her back. There’s also a mini grabber tool that can grasp the spear, lay it across the shield’s platform, and launch it.

Char’s a surprisingly good artist.

“The shooting gadget on her arm appears small compared to the length of the spear,” Iris observes.

“Every time you open your mouth, it’s something negative,” I counter.

“I-I didn’t mean it like that! I’m just being honest...”

“Look at this drawing here. This one shows the final form.”

There are three drawings.

They go in sequence from default-, loading-, to firing-stage. As the grabber loads a spear, the buckler lengthens as well as expands

sideways like outstretched wings.

“Why, though...?”

“For the fantasy.”

“For the fantasy!”

“Yup, the fantasy.”

It’s the little things that make it so exciting. She really doesn’t get it.

“Now that we’ve settled on the design, let’s take it for a spin,” I suggest.

“But we have to build it first. That’s the part that’s going to be tremendously challenging...” Iris looks over at me skeptically.

Professor Tear and Liza both eye me tauntingly, *You couldn’t*.

“Here’s what I’ve got so far.”

I pull something out from under the table like in those short cooking shows where they go, *“Here’s the meat after it’s been marinating for three days.”*

“...” (Iris gapes at me.)

“...” (Professor Tear’s glasses slide down her nose.)

“...” (Liza’s gaze wanders off to space.)

“Amazing as always, Brother Haruto! You’re way ahead!”

Char's the only one who seems to accept reality.



Deep in a cave on the outskirts of the capital...

A young man is standing alone.

Long white hair and a slim physique. His fine features are like those of a child, and he could easily look like a boy or a girl.

Just as I suspected. She's already gone.

A faint trail of residual mana is what led him here.

He knew she was already gone because he picked up on the "traces" of her leaving the location, too.

Still, he'd come because he wanted to make sure of something.

He sniffs the ever-so-subtle scent of mana lingering on the floor along the wall.

Fear, anxiety, resignation, regret... He detects a variety of emotions.

And...

She isn't incapacitated. She's...

Broken.

His comrade─nay, they should be called siblings since they share a parent─had been destroyed. And yet, she's alive.

"Hmm. I don't quite understand what's going on."

The boy with white hair shrugs his shoulders.

"Oh well. I suppose I can just ask her since she's alive. What a hassle."

The boy turns and walks away.

Contrary to his words, a hint of sadistic pleasure exudes from his smile...

Bonus Interlude:

Not-So-Quick and Easy Cooking Show

I'm trying to remember when it happened—before I met Liza, so it's been quite some time. Or maybe it was pretty recent.

A little over ten years since being reincarnated in this alternate universe.

Compared to modern-day Japan, there are quite a few inconveniences living here. But most things are manageable with my Barrier magic. In fact, my quirky powers make life almost too easy.

Still, there was one thing that bothered me.

I thought I'd have no complaints as long as I get to burrow up and watch anime. But in fact, I was reaching my limit.

I missed white rice.

To crack open a raw egg over a bowl of steamy rice, pour a dash of soy sauce, mix it up all gooey to perfection, and then shovel it down my throat.

Just thinking about it makes me drool.

I longed for miso soup, too.

My favorite kind is with tofu and seaweed. Sometimes with a bit of chopped scallion. Not too hot, but not lukewarm either. The feeling when it slides down your throat at just the right temperature leaves quite an impression. Nothing compares.

As a matter of fact, I'm currently working on white rice. I managed to find something pretty close to Japonica rice and I've been using Barrier magic to sort of tweak it thisaway and thataway.

Admittedly, it's Johnny and his skeleton brigade who are doing the actual cultivating.

In contrast to the rice, which has been a long-term battle, I

figured that soy sauce and miso would be achievable if I can gather the right ingredients.

Turned out I was right.

I mean, it wasn't quick like a cooking show. But when I followed the recipe exactly, it was pretty easy.

The wealth of information on the internet amazes me. How effortlessly I was able to find ways to make miso and soy sauce. And who could've imagined a day would come where I'd even be searching for such things?

My Barrier magic was tremendously useful in providing the necessary tools and environment for the process. Thanks, Barrier magic.

"What a beautiful black color."

Flay held up the brimming glass container and admired it. But before long□

Glug glug glug glug!

Did she just drink the whole thing?

"My," she exclaimed, "isn't this a rich aroma... It flows throughout not just my mouth, but my whole body. And the saltiness is..."

I heard somewhere that you can die from chugging soy sauce. But Flay seemed just fine. Must be a demon thing.

But that's not it, Flay. Soy sauce isn't meant to be drunk by itself.

As a starter, I tried my hand at making a fried egg. A simple dish with no seasoning. I dripped some soy sauce over it.

"Heavenly! Its rich aroma is overflowing in my mouth!"

Same reaction as when she guzzled it.

"The moment I swallow it, the joyousness comes back up to my mouth, beckoning me to take another bite. What a unique sensation!"

She had a particular way of putting things, but I got the gist. She's

pleased.

Next, I flew off to the ocean, brought back a fish, and filleted it.

Sashimi. *Hope you like it.*

“Eh? You dip the raw fish in the sauce and eat it? How odd...

Nom nom... Wh?!”

Flay widens her eyes intensely.

“The moment it enters my mouth, the saltiness and the aroma overwhelm my senses! And as I’m chewing the tender fish, the flavor develops into slight sweetness. The harmony of it all imparts a luxurious experience!”

She was speaking with such enthusiasm that beams of light were practically shooting out of her eyes and mouth.

“So, tasty?”

“Sublime!”

Another rave review, phew.

I was feeling pretty bold. I made teriyaki with a blowfish-like sea creature that I’d caught.

“This, too! It’s simply...”

I’ll omit the rest but basically, she was satisfied.

Flay’s sense of taste is pretty close to that of humans. She’s a surprisingly good cook; her dishes suit the human palate. On top of that, it turned out she’s also a talented food critic.

That wrapped up the testing phase.

I set the table with an array of soy sauce-flavored dishes.

“The saltiness is too intense by itself, but when used discerningly, the taste and fragrance are excellent.”

“The fact that *you* made it is already the best seasoning, but I just can’t stop eating!”

I was a little worried whether it would suit the people of this

universe but to my relief, my dad and mom seemed to like it.

As for the littlest alternate-universe native...

“Ooooh! Delicious!”

She liked it, too. As her big brother, I was happy.

“So this is the taste of anime! Ooh, then...” Char’s eyes grew bright and round. “...what does ‘wasabi’ taste like?”

Oh, that.

Actually, I did find a similar ingredient in this world, and I even prepared some by grating it up.

“Charlotte...”

Flay clamped her hand down on Char’s shoulder.

“You don’t want to try that.”

The red-haired maid trembled; her eyes brimmed with tears.

I'm this close to attaining my goal as an on-campus shut-in.

My assignment, "To retrieve a sacred weapon in a decaying ruin" was thought to be doomed when the proof of its existence was destroyed. But everything changed when I had the epiphany, "To forge and submit a fake sacred weapon," and now things are moving right along.

Of course, we still need to test it out. I ask Professor Tear if there's a castle wall somewhere that we can blow up without upsetting anyone.

"..." (Professor Tear looks at me with contempt.)

"Sigh..." (Iris exhales dramatically.)

Geez. No need to be rude about it.

"I'm sure there are abandoned fortresses out there if you look. But tearing them down isn't going to achieve your goal," says the professor.

Iris voices, "I had a feeling we weren't on the same page and now I know why. It seems you're misunderstanding what's meant by 'castle walls,' Haruto."

"Castle walls are basically walls built out of stacks of rocks, right? How else am I supposed to interpret it?"

"Your interpretation isn't wrong, but it's not *complete*."

Professor Tear adds, "Any building of significance, not just castles, is protected with defensive barriers. They're conjured using ley lines in order to reduce the burden on the sorcerer. As a result, they're tens of times stronger than a plain stone wall. The castle walls Iris and I are referring to are those."

Oh. So that's why they were making a big deal out of destroying them in a single strike.

“I see. What you’re saying is finding the right place for a trial run isn’t going to be easy.”

I suppose we could sneak an attack on one of the castle walls in the capital, but I don’t want to deal with the nuisance that’ll follow.

On the other hand, I can’t just go and whip one up because I don’t actually know how much defensive power a typical castle wall has.

“How is it that your first thought isn’t ‘smashing a castle wall in one blow will be difficult?’” Professor Tear sighs.

That part should be easy. All I have to do is adjust the strength to the level of a typical castle wall.

“There is one place nearby that would meet all the requirements,” she muses.

Once again, Professor Tear comes through! When I ask her where, she answers with a mischievous grin:

“The Olympius Ruins.”

And so, we arrive at the entrance of the ruins via the Anywhere Door.

Mel was still in a state of shock, but fortunately, Polkos showed up just in time to look after her.

“Maybe I should’ve asked about this earlier, Professor Tear... But all of these walls are pretty wrecked already...”

“All you need is a wall with the right level of defensive power, right?” She points to the temple-like structure. “Go on. *Ka-blammo* it away!”

The building that leads to the underground dungeon is strangely pristine. I guess it really is protected by some inexplicable energy.

“For starters, why not try blasting it with the weapon you used on the Huge Rock-Eater? That should give you an idea of the wall’s strength.”

Blast it with my magic gun, huh?

The thing is, the power level on that gun is adjustable and I could turn it up way higher if I wanted to.

I'll start by using the same amount of force I used on that monster.

Without giving it much thought, I aim the magic gun and fire off a shot.

A huge energy ball hits the wall just next to the entrance, putting a crack in its surface.

“Wow, it’s pretty tough.”

“That weapon’s quite impressive. Any ordinary attack wouldn’t even leave a scratch.”

Oh, really? Hmm. If I turn up the magic gun’s capacity to max, it’ll probably blow up the whole structure. I’m not gonna say that out loud, though.

“All right. Let’s move on to the real test. But be careful not to destroy the entrance. If we do, the headmistress is bound to give us an earful.”

Right. These ruins are used as the testing site for graduating students. I should’ve been more careful just now, too.

I set up the (fake) sacred weapon.

I could just fire off a simple shot, but that wouldn’t be entertaining.

Wanting to satisfy my little sister’s expectations, I decide to add a little pizzazz.

‘*Anfang*. [Begin.]’

“Did it just speak?!” exclaims Char.

Wow, her eyes are really sparkling.

As a mechanical voice recites the random German phrases (that I plucked from the internet), the robot arm jerkily reaches for a stake from behind my back and fastens it to my arm contraption.

‘Bereit. [Ready.]’

“Let’s go!”

‘Einverstanden, Meister. [Okay, Master.]’

With a firm leap forward, I dart straight towards the temple-ish building. I draw back my geared arm and punch into the wall near the entrance.

Just before impact, I conjure a magic circle in front of my fist.

The spear launches on impact. It collides into the wall with a tremendous *boom*, leaving a giant hole about fifteen feet in diameter.

Pretty good choreography if I say so myself.

“Amazing as always, Brother Haruto!”

When I look behind me, I see Char jumping and dancing.

I’m happy that she’s happy.

And my weapon’s force seems sufficient. Maybe a little more wouldn’t hurt.

Should I yell a badass one-liner as I attack? Oh, but it’ll get drowned out by the explosion, I ponder as I walk back to the group.

“You really did wreck it in one blow...”

“That wall’s at least as strong as the kingdom’s castle walls...”

“I don’t understand the mechanism of the talking inanimate object...”

Iris, Professor Tear, and Liza seem stupefied. *Come on, how about a little more enthusiasm?*

“Well, at least it’s strong enough, right, Professor Tear?”

“It might even be stronger than the Flash Princess’s Divine Blade of Light. I just have one question...”

“What is it?”

“Why the point-blank punch when the weapon has long-range shooting capabilities?”

Oh, that.

I turn to the building and extend my armored hand. A spear launches and blows open another hole not far from the one I just busted. But this one’s small—only about seven feet in diameter.

“As you can see, it works as a mid-range projectile weapon as well. But I’ve designed it to have lower firepower the farther away the target.”

To wield its max power, it has to be fired point-blank.

“With your abilities, I’m sure you can give it the same force regardless of distance, or even configure it to have greater power the greater the distance. I suppose the reason you didn’t is...for the fantasy factor?”

Yes. I knew she’d get it.

The closer you get, the greater the blast. It’s just cooler that way.

“Now it needs a name,” my sister pipes up. “Ooh, what wonderful name should we give it?”

Up to you, Char.

Now then. I’ve completed the task required for me to be a shut-in at school.

As a wave of relief washes over me, Professor Tear mutters, “Are you sure you want to take credit for this, Haruto?”

Hahaha! No way!

“It was thanks to Char’s talents.”

If we go with that, everything should be good.

“Yes, but... Sacred weapons need to seal a covenant with a handler in order to be used. It cannot be wielded by others, and only the death of its wielder can break the covenant.”

Come to think of it, I have heard that. Although the part about

breaking the covenant is new to me.

I don't feel good about foisting this weapon on Char.

After all, it's a genuine fake.

And Char's destined to become queen of this land one day. True, I designed it to suit her tastes, but I'm sure there's a suitable real weapon somewhere out there for her.

That old witch's Blade of Light could be Char's. The heroine of justice should wield a righteous sword. It's much cooler that way.

But for the time being...

"Then we'll say Shiva did it."

Professor Tear counters, "Shiva could easily blast a hole in the wall without a sacred weapon. Even the headmistress can figure as much."

Oh.

"Consequently, she'll probably ask for a demonstration."

"Either way, we have to decide who its owner is. Otherwise, she's gonna take possession of this bootleg, right?"

"Right. Hopefully, she'll buy the excuse that someone accidentally sealed the covenant..."

Who should we assign it to?

Professor Tear and I both turn to the same person.

"Oh no, I don't think I can learn to operate that right away," Iris disputes.

"You could, like, practice?"

"And that's going to take time is what I'm saying."

"Okay, then," I say. "We'll just have Shiva give the demonstration of the pseudo-sacred weapon."

And claim that he's able to use it without a covenant.

As for the reason, we'll just leave it a mystery. After all, Shiva himself is a man of mystery. It all fits.

“That being the case, like I said earlier, blowing up a building at some tumbledown site isn’t a good enough demo,” Professor Tear argues.

“Is there a high-level bad guy we can defeat somewhere around here?”

“Oh, like the perfect enemy is just going to conveniently appear?” She rolls her eyes.

Well, there is one person who comes to mind, but should we really slay the queen?

“Besides, there’s still one other problem. How do we explain the phenomenon in the ruins? We don’t have a single clue. Or rather... Mel would seem to hold the key. But for now, it’s still inexplicable.”

Right. That’s another issue.

Char raises her hand.

“I suspect that this is the work of one of the devils who instigated Bloodless Vier and got away. Perhaps if we look into it more, we can find proof!”

“That’s not impossible but it might be wishful thinking.”

While Professor Tear is busy drooping her shoulders and sighing...

“I just realized I forgot something. I’ll be right back.” I leave everyone hanging and head back to the Anywhere Door.

“Forgot something”? You expect us to believe...

“Sit back and make yourselves at home while I’m out!”

“Wait... Don’t tell me□” Professor Tear’s face contorts as if she just realized something and looks over at Char.

The little blonde girl gazes back innocently. She genuinely doesn’t have a clue.

Dare I say, does this kid have the ability to turn casual ideas into reality?

There's an intruder at the research lab.



Ka-blam!

“Yeek!” Polkos physically jumps in surprise at the sudden bang.

“Wh-What was that...?”

The sound of the explosion came from outside—near the front entrance.

He thinks about stepping out to investigate, but he can't leave the child lying on the sofa all alone.

The sweaty teacher opens the window and leans out, scouring for anything out of the ordinary.

“Boo!”

“Gyeeeeek!!”

Someone springs up in Polkos's face, startling him so much that he faints.

“Hahaha! ‘Gyeek!’ he says! What a joke!” the intruder cackles in delight.

A young man with fine features is hanging upside down out the window. His hair is long and white. His androgynous face beams with childlike innocence.

He slips in through the window and tilts his head as he looks down at Polkos.

“Still, though. Passing out from a little spook like that? I guess that seamless barrier outside wasn't his doing.”

The boy nudges Polkos—who is out cold—with his foot. He's

puzzled by how weak the man's mana feels.

"Orsay..." the little girl on the sofa whimpers.

"Hey! Long time no see, Melcuemenes. You've certainly gotten small."

The young man Orsay grins cheerily as he saunters over to the girl.

"Why are you...here?"

"To rescue you, duh. Since your mana's drained and you lost your powers just kidding!"

Orsay laughs again and flings his arms out exuberantly.

"I waited and waited for the reincarnation of Lord Lucifyra, but nothing happened. I had no choice but to go out and investigate. And what do I find? The capital is peaceful and you're nowhere to be seen. I followed the diminishing trail of your mana and finally found you here. Reduced to a pathetic scrap."

Melcuemenes shivers with dread.

"Talk. Tell me what happened. After that, I'm ending you."

With a lighthearted smile still plastered to his face, he continues, "I imagine it's hard for you to accept your death since you're engineered for survival. But my mind is made. You lost your function as a vessel; there's no reason for you to exist, is there? Now, if you tell me everything, I'll put you down gently."

"..."

"Fine. If you have no intention of talking, I'll kill you right now. But if you're still trying to hold on for dear life, you can buy yourself some time to think by talking for as long as possible."

In any case, her death is certain.

Melcuemenes is broken.

It's true□having lost the ability to revive the Devil Lord, she has no reason to live. In spite of that, she's clinging to her existence.

The only thing she can do now is attempt to escape the immediate danger.

And so...

“N-No... No! Help!!”

She curls up on the sofa and lets out a scream.

“Hey, now. What's this about? Don't tell me your head is broken on top of your function□hrg?!”

He's struck with a side-blow.

An invisible force shoves Orsay back outside the window which he entered through.

Good.

At least she's spared from the immediate threat. But once Orsay reveals that she's a devil, *that man* is sure to be after her life as well.

Now would be the chance to flee, but *he's* bound to catch up to her sooner or later. All Melcuemenes can do is pray.

Once outside, the invisible force continues to drive Orsay forth. Suddenly, the course changes upward.

“Wh-What is this?”

The force doesn't inflict any damage. But Orsay's efforts to push it away are futile; the invisible energy stays right by his side.

“Is this...a barrier? Its mana is identical to the one I broke through earlier.”

But as soon as he tries to gather any more clues about it, the thing vanishes.

I'm free! Orsay straightens himself up. Just then...

“Wha?! A floor?!”

Orsay lands on a checkered white surface. Even though he’s way up in the air—almost a thousand feet above the ground. Not only that, but the floor also stretches out in all directions. It must be at least three thousand feet across.

“Ridiculous! This wasn’t here a moment ago! When did—”

Orsay glares straight ahead and yells out.

“Did you do this, you freak?”

A man in an uncanny, black full-body costume is standing in front of him.

“I did. And since I’m answering your question, I have one for you, too. Are you a devil?”

The man’s voice is unpleasant, like numerous voices speaking all at once.

“Heh. How’d you figure it out? I’m designed to be undetectable even with a Mija’s Crystal.”

“That’s exactly why. Just like Melcuemenes and Agoss, you’re hard to read.”

Orsay can’t comprehend what those words mean.

Or what the man’s intentions are.

The devil asks, “Isn’t the intent of an ambush attack to kill the enemy? Or at least inflicting some damage? That said, you don’t seem to want to have a friendly chat either. What *do* you want?”

“I have my own agenda. You’re just the guy I need for our sacred weapon demonstration.”

What he’s saying makes even less sense. Orsay is completely lost.

But what he’s even more lost on is...

“What...is that?”

A long plank-like apparatus suddenly appears on the man's arm, along with several spears on his back.

First the floor, then this. Things appearing out of nowhere—it's impossible.

That would make it creation magic. The realm of a god.

No, it can't be. There must be a trick.

Orsay decides to divine some clues from their conversation.

The man in black shows no sign of aggression.

Instead, he starts talking—unwittingly going along with the young devil's idea. "While I'm at it, I have a few more questions. You were the one messing around at the Olympius Ruins, weren't you?" The man points his finger accusingly.

Orsay has no idea what he's talking about.

But before he can answer, the stranger donned in black piles on the questions.

"Why did you kidnap Mel—that little girl? What are you plotting? Is it related to reviving the Devil Lord?"

"Hah, that traitor. I came to kill her, obviously."

"A 'traitor,' huh? When you're the one who forced her into cooperating? You really are scum."

"Look, I don't know what you're —"

"Silence!"

You're the one who asked, and now you're telling me to shut up? Yeesh.

In any case, the man in all-black doesn't seem to realize that the little girl is Melcuemenes.

Which means Melcuemenes hid her identity when she made contact with him.

Is this the guy who caused our Lord's revival plan to fail? Is that why Melcuemenes kept her identity concealed when she approached him?

If that's the case, there's no reason to reveal the truth.

"I am Shiva, the harbinger of justice. You will now atone for your crimes so I can live my life as a shut-in at school, and also for bullying a little girl."

The man strikes a funny pose.

There's no point in continuing this conversation. *He's making no sense anyway.*

The man in all-black may be a bizarre character, but he's still human. There's no way a mere human can beat a devil.

Orsay switches gears to battle mode.



The devil Orsay is ready to fight, but he doesn't attack immediately.

Not out of caution against this unknown foe.

But simply because his curiosity has gotten the better of him.

I want to understand the inexplicable phenomena I've witnessed so far.

Communicating with the man has been fruitless, but there are various other hints.

This floor... It's some kind of barrier designed for physical defense. And he's giving it the appearance of a floor with illusion magic.

If so, Orsay can surmise that while Shiva seemed like he appeared out of nowhere, he was also likely using illusion magic to cloak himself and his weapon.

He's good at ambushing his opponents as well as distracting them with trickery and incomprehensible blabbering.

Orsay is sussing out Shiva AKA Haruto pretty accurately.

By the same token, if he has to ambush his foes, it probably means he isn't strong enough to go toe to toe without the element of surprise on his side.

However, Orsay misreads a crucial element.

But what about his first attack? He used Barrier magic.

The man *mobilized* a barrier to bring Orsay out here.

But barriers are fundamentally a fixed area of space. They aren't movable.

Such a thing could only be possible in the realm of Ancient Magic.

He must be a practitioner of Ancient Magic.

Once more, Orsay is getting closer to the truth.

Well, if so, he can't be all that tough. The ability to move barriers is baffling, but that's probably his only special power. Otherwise, it doesn't make sense that he didn't inflict any damage on me with his first attack.

Once again, he's wrong about a key point.

Hmph. Now that I've thought it through, it's really quite simple. I've figured out his ruse. He's certainly no threat.

As a result, Orsay draws a critically wrong conclusion.

Having completely underestimated his foe, the white-haired devil even starts to feel a bit playful.

"I see more or less what sort of man you are."

"What...?" exclaims Shiva, still in his weird pose.

"You get your enemies to let down their guard, and then you hit them with a surprise attack, right? For example, right now, you've got a bunch of little barriers floating behind me. You call my attention to the weapon in your hand but the real one is aimed at my back. Am I wrong?"

"?!"

Orsay sneers at the visibly spooked enemy.

“I’m a devil specialized in espionage and investigation. I can pick up on the most minute quantity of mana that most people wouldn’t notice.”

That’s a half-lie.

It’s true that he has excellent mana-detection abilities. That’s why he was able to accurately sense the little barriers behind him.

But that ability is only supplementary.

Orsay commands the highest level of offensive power among the Devil Lord’s spawn.

He’s a devil specialized in invasion and extermination.

His role is to detect even the feeblest of enemies and eliminate them. Even those who are barely breathing won’t slip past him.

For that reason, he’s able to accurately sniff out traces of mana that are imperceptible to other beings.

This talent is what enabled him to catch the faintest mana of Melcuemenes and track her down.

He’s lying, though, in stating that he isn’t made for combat.

“...”

Orsay reads into the meaning behind Shiva’s silence.

Aww, he can tell I overpower him and now he’s too terrified to utter a word. Pathetic, Orsay concludes based on his observation.

He’d hoped to coax his prey into lowering his guard and slowly, but surely, plunge them into despair. *Deceit isn’t my strong suit,* Orsay chuckles at himself.

I suppose it’s only reasonable that any practiced sorcerer would be able to detect my tremendous mana. Tee-hee-hee. Well, that’s just fine.

It’s always thrilling to torture a terrified victim to death.

But Orsay has neglected to consider the flaw in his gift.

The flip side of his ability to perceive the most minute mana is

that he's not keen on gauging larger scale mana.

Melcuemenes, whose specialty is survival, detected Haruto's extraordinary mana immediately. Orsay can grasp a sense of Haruto's mana. However, he subconsciously buries it deep in the back of his mind.

How could anyone possess mana equivalent to a "god"?

All right. Now that I've seen through his attempt to ambush me, what will he do?

Shiva's next move is predictable.

He'll still try to attack with the little barriers behind me that I already know about and seize that moment as a chance to flee.

Orsay decides to initiate.

"I bestow upon you the gift of crushing despair!"

He calls upon his true powers with only one intent in mind: to torture Shiva—who can only stand frozen in terror.

"Whaaat?!"

The man's cry of disbelief is like music to Orsay's ears.

The devil unleashes his full mana. His entire body instantaneously swells up.

"Grraaauuugh!"

Golden-colored fur from head to toe, black-spotted pattern—he's transformed into a giant, bipedal leopard-like beast over thirty feet in height. His sharp claws and fangs gleam in the sunlight.

Orsay snarls, "Sorry, but I have no intention of going easy on you. I'll give you a good taste of my claws. Wh—?!"

Ka-pow-pow-pow-pow!

Explosive pain stabs into the leopard-beast's back.

"Ghrk... Wh-What?"

It must be the little barriers—they harpoon straight through his backside, penetrate his guts, and stop short before exiting from his abdomen.

“Aw, come on. For a big talker, your defense is paper-thin.”

Paper-thin? Impossible! Quickly, Orsay funnels his mana into self-healing.

My body in this form is supposed to be more impermeable than the walls of the royal castle...

His skin and fur contain multiple layers of defensive magic. Any ordinary attack wouldn't even inflict a speck of damage.

And yet...

“Hmm... Well, I did stop short, so... Hopefully, the frontal footage will be enough.”

Once again, Shiva is spouting nonsense.

“Even a grunt could've looked like a formidable enemy if they'd delivered the right lines. But why did you have to go and blab that you're only good at spying?”

What is this man talking about?!

“Eh, I guess I can make it work with some editing.”

He crouches low and draws back his arm bearing the unusual weapon.

“Wha... H-Hey... Wait a mi—”

“Pierce through, nameless pseudo-sacred weapon!”

The man in black thrusts his fist forward.

The spear-shaped missile launches.

*Impossible... I'm a devil! The strongest even among my own kind!
How can this clown...*

With all his energy focused on self-healing, Orsay can't move. He

can't even follow the bolting spear with his eyes.

“Ah□”

Voosh!

As the weapon impales his throat, shock waves reverberate throughout his body.

BLAM!

The impact tears up the young devil's head and upper torso.



So this is what they mean when they say, “All sizzle, no steak.”

One of those guys who brags a lot but turns out to be a weenie.
Don't wanna end up like him.

I mean, he did admit he “specializes in investigating” like a fool. You can't blame me for showing him a thing or two when he acted all tough and then proved himself otherwise.

Still, that guy did see through my sneak attack□I guess even a crappy devil is still a devil.

Up 'til now, nobody's ever detected my game. I'd better refine how to completely conceal my mana. I think I can manage.

“Now... Did I get some good shots?” I muse like a movie director.

I play back the freshly captured battle footage.

“Hmm. He gets pretty wobbly here. Oh well. I'll have to cut out the entire clip where he gets mauled from behind.”

The video is for my sacred weapon presentation to the headmistress.

I'll need to mitigate any chance that could accidentally give away the guy's paper-thin defense.

As far as the issue of having to seal a covenant with the weapon in order to use it goes□I'll claim that Shiva's special powers exempt him from such restrictions, and that's just how it is. I figure I can get away with baloney like that since Shiva's such a mystery-man.

“Let me mute the audio, too. All the headmistress needs to see is the thing's power.”

I said some dumb stuff too, knowing that I'd have to go back and

delete them. But also, the opponent's spoken parts were loaded with implications of how weak he was, so his lines are also unusable.

“Yeah, that's more like it. The scene where he transforms is way more dramatic without audio.”

Shiva decimates a powerful foe in a single move□that's a good clip.

With this, I'll dupe that headmistress and lead my shut-in life at the academy!

I stash what's left of the devil's body in mystery space-time, erase the floor barrier, and triumphantly head back to Professor Tear's research lab.



I return to Headmistress Theresia's office, confident in my flawless preparations.

If she approves, I'll be able to lead a happy reclusive life in the place I despise most□school. There's something ironic about that, but let's not get into it.

“Heya, Headmistress! My student beat your stupid challenge and we're here to give you a report.”

Professor Tear gets straight to the point as soon as we enter her office.

Headmistress Theresia Montpelier, who was in the middle of doing paperwork behind her desk, stares wide-eyed for a moment before she gives us a polite smile.

“That certainly was quick. You still have time until the due date.”

“Well, there was no cheating, I'll tell you. And this man-in-black

certainly didn't do anything to help." Professor Tear slaps me (in Shiva Mode) on the back.

There are three of us here: Professor Tear, me, and Haruto C (as me).

"I'd like to believe that, but I do wish you'd explain why this man is here."

Yup, she's skeptical all right.

"I will reveal the reason I'm here later on. First, let's start with Professor Illseianal's report," I say.

"The name is Luseiannel. If you can't get it right, don't say it. And why do I get the feeling you're intentionally dissing me..."

It was an honest mistake, but I guess it could've been a Freudian slip.

Aherm! Professor Tear clears her throat and takes charge again.

"Now, as far as the story behind obtaining the item goes, there were no monsters at all within the ruins, as reported earlier. More precisely, Haruto and his party claim that they *didn't encounter* any monsters."

Haruto C nods in agreement.

We forbade him from speaking. This way, he can't say anything that might reveal the ruse. Besides, what Professor Tear said is not a total lie. I should keep my mouth shut, too. Wouldn't wanna get in the way.

"And you believe that this was due to interference from a certain group—is that accurate, Tearietta?"

"Yes. And we found him. A very unusual creature known as a 'devil.'"

"What?!"

The headmistress looks pretty surprised. Why is she looking at me?

“Shiva□that’s your name, isn’t it? Did you contend with that enemy?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, basically...”

Whoops. I wasn’t supposed to talk.

Ehem! Ehem! Professor Tear coughs and cuts in. Nice timing.

“In the end, that’s what happened. But Haruto and his teammates were assigned to ‘obtain the sacred weapon in the ruins.’ The task to ‘investigate the abnormality in the ruins’ was tacked on later. Shiva was conducting the same investigation independently, so his collaboration in that matter shouldn’t be a problem, correct?”

“Well... No. According to your report, Haruto successfully completed both assignments. However...”

Professor Tear, full of confidence, interjects:

“You want proof, right? Of course, we have ample proof!”

She’s really good at this sort of thing. She’s leading the headmistress by the nose at this point.

Professor Tear eyes me. I raise my palm in the air.

Bloing! A long spear appears out of nowhere.

“What the□?!”

“Headmistress, please hold your questions until the end.” Professor Tear quiets the pink-haired woman with a cheeky grin. She seems to be enjoying herself.

For starters, I pull three spears out of the air and set them down on the floor. As I spy the headmistress trembling in the corner of my eye□*is she okay?*□I pull the arm plate out of mystery space-time as well and set it down next to the spears.

“Storage...magic?”

“Don’t just stand there looking baffled. Inspect them,” the tiny

professor demands.

“...”

Looking slightly indignant, the headmistress rises to her feet and approaches the (fake) sacred weapon. Her brows furrow in confusion as she bends down and places her fingers on one of the spears.

She gives each one a thorough examination.

Finally, she picks up the arm plate and looks at it carefully.

“This is...”

Ulp! I swallow.

Can she tell it's a fake? Does it lack some sort of divine quality that only a sacred weapon can possess?

“Such mystical mana. Just like the queen's Divine Blade of Light. Nay—the mana I sense from this might even be grander.”

“Huh? Really?” Professor Tear is taken by surprise at the headmistress's reaction.

“What?”

“Oh, right! Yes, of course. You sense that too, don't you, Shiva?”

“Absolutely. This is no ordinary magical device,” I respond coolly. But inside, my heart is racing.

Still, I never endowed the thing with any sort of “mystical” energy. Is the headmistress just bullshitting?

“And where was this?”

She's addressing Haruto C, but Professor Tear answers for him.

“About thirty floors down. Of course, I can tell you all about what they had to do to reach that level.”

The teacher proceeds to spin an entertaining tale full of passion and drama.

Even without monsters, it's not easy for some students to reach that far down in the dungeon. She emphasizes my leadership and the way I made the most of the girls' talents.

The woman's actually a really good storyteller.

"And then when the trio reached the thirtieth level—what a surprise! They found what appeared to be the sacred weapon! Lying right there on the ground!"

I wish she'd built that part up more.

"But that wasn't the only surprise. Believe it or not... There was a little girl lying on the floor next to it!"

Oh. Here it comes.

Before we headed for the headmistress's office, we agreed to disclose Mel's existence semi-honestly. We hadn't discussed the details.

So the girls and I were about to flee the dungeon and carry Mel to safety. And that's when...

"That's when the devil appeared!"

Professor Tear narrates how I strived to come up with an elaborate strategy to save the girls from the mighty foe.

I'm such a good guy. In her story, at least.

"But the devil was indomitable—Haruto's life was like a candle in the wind... When all of a sudden!"

This is where Shiva comes in. He transports everyone (including the devil) outside and uses the pseudo-sacred weapon to defeat the enemy. And we all lived happily ever after.

"I see. So the weapon's power has already been tested."

She turns to Shiva.

I feel like Professor Tear's persuasive monologue might be enough to pull through.

At the same time, I don't want to waste the trouble I went through to make the demo footage. I conjure up a screen in front of her.

"Wha..."

Her reaction is toning down.

Peering at the headmistress, Professor Tear murmurs, “I know. I started to accept him slowly, too. Eventually, you’ll get used to it and just embrace him for who he is.”

Yep. My dad was like that, too.

So yeah, just go along with it.

Anyway, my carefully crafted silent movie starts to play...



Headmistress Theresia’s eyes widen as the playful-looking boy transforms into an enormous beast.

During the part where the Black Knight (me) obliterates the bipedal leopard beast, she even lets out an “Unbelievable...” under her breath.

All right. This is good. She seems to be immersed in the movie.

For good measure, I add, “Honestly, I don’t know what devils are. But I will tell you he was a formidable enemy. While it may seem like I was able to handle it with ease, I would’ve had a hard time without the Pile Catastrophe—the sacred weapon found by Haruto and his friends.”

“Pile...what?”

“The sacred weapons have names, right? Like the Divine Blade of Light?”

“The Divine Blade of Light was named by its discoverer, the great sage Granfelt. None of the sacred weapons discovered thus far has an original name.”

Oh. Is that so?

I look to the side to see Professor Kiddy Glasses averting her gaze. *Hah, the weasel.* She knew, but she forgot to mention it to me.

The headmistress challenges, “You just said you found the weapon lying in the dungeon. How were you able to find out its name?”

“Look here. It says it on the back.”

Hastily, I engrave the name in super small print on the back of the arm plate. Teeny tiny lettering, like writing on a grain of rice.

The headmistress squints at the inscription.

“I didn’t notice it before...”

“Well, it is very small. You must have overlooked it.”

I figured I’d have to make this excuse. That’s why I wrote it so small.

Professor Tear jumps in without missing a beat. “To be honest, we have no way of being sure that this is one of the seven sublime weapons. But its power is at least equivalent to one, so wouldn’t you say the team has completed their assignment?”

“Precisely as you say, Professor Tear. It would be impossible for these students to prepare such a weapon beforehand.”

It’s true. I didn’t prepare it beforehand; I threw it together afterwards!

The headmistress smiles brightly at Haruto C.

“Congratulations, Haruto. I hereby declare your assignment complete.”

I clench my fists hard.

Haruto C shuffles his feet while keeping his mouth shut. It’s his victory dance. *Maybe say something? It’s kinda weird at this point that you’re still silent.*

Anyway, the only real hurdle has been cleared.

It’s safe to say I’m practically an inch away from fulfilling Operation: Be a Shut-in at the Academy.

“By the way...” the headmistress says, stroking the pseudo-sacred weapon. “Shiva—was it? I take it you sealed a covenant with this weapon?”

Huh? I cock my head sideways for a second, but then I remember.

A covenant needs to be sealed with the sacred weapon for someone to use it.

“No... I merely borrowed it temporarily.”

“Borrowed it? You were able to use it without sealing a covenant?”

“Basically. Setting aside whether this weapon is an authentic sacred weapon or not, the same rule applies to it—you need to seal a covenant. The reason why I was able to operate it is a secret. I ask that you not pry.”

Superheroes have lots of secrets. There’s nothing weird about that.

“I understand. Very well—I will refrain from probing. Now, allow me to take care of this.”

The headmistress picks up the arm plate.

“Wait.”

I can’t let her take it. And we’ve prepared an excuse for this scenario, too.

“What’s the matter?”

“When we found the item, we accidentally triggered the sealing in an attempt to verify whether it really is a sacred weapon.”

“But you said you aren’t bound to it.”

“I’m not.”

“Then who is?”

She’s practically knocking me over with her intense gaze, so I get right to the point.

“Irisphilia.”

By process of elimination, that was the decision we came to. Although, Irisphilia herself resisted it to the end.

“So she did...” The headmistress places a hand to her chin. She seems to be deep in thought.

“I was able to bring it here today, but the weapon rightfully belongs to her. It must remain in her possession.”

We taught Iris a transformation pose and some catchphrases that Char came up with. The weapon responds to specific movements and commands that prompt it to do stuff like load and vanish.

“Very well. But the management of this weapon must be discussed with the nobles of the House of Lords. Will you tell Ms. Irisphilia to come and see me?”

“No prob,” Professor Tear responds flippantly. “Just double-checking, but this means Haruto has completed the assignment, right?”

“Yes. I will consult with the House of Lords and convince them to accept the situation. However...” the headmistress pronounces sternly. “Haruto still has another challenge to complete. We can now consider him exempt from the practical magic courses, but he must also pass the written test. Otherwise, I’ll have to tutor him myself with a customized curriculum.”

Professor Tear fields this one.

“Of course we haven’t forgotten. I’m sure Haruto can even handle an imperial sorcerer’s trial exam.”

Uh, could you not raise the stakes, please?

That said, I won’t be the one actually taking them.

For the written exam portion, I can cheat all I want with my funky Barrier magic. I’m counting on you, Professor Tear and Liza!

“I expect great things, Haruto. I can’t imagine you would ever

dream of cheating, but in any case, there will be measures put in place to prevent foul play, just as there are for the entrance exam and other official tests.”

Heh heh heh. I already knew that. No surprises there.

I never took the entrance exam, but Professor Tear’s told me about it. The test site is vaulted with layers of large-scale barriers.

But when it comes to barriers, I’m in my wheelhouse. *She’ll* be the one in the palm of *my* hand.

So...

I’ll spare you the details, but I aced the written test with a perfect score. Hooray.



Theresia Montpellier leans back in her chair in the headmistress’s office.

She glances over the paper in her hand again and lets out a soft chortle.

“Quite a handful, that Haruto Zenfis.”

Every single answer on the test sheet is correct.

Some of the questions were so difficult that even the sitting imperial sorcerers have been unable to crack them.

The number of people in the kingdom who can solve these problems within the allotted time are few enough to count on one hand. The only person in Theresia’s circle of acquaintances would be Tearietta Luseiannel, the greatest genius ever to attend the academy.

As a student, Haruto certainly is bright but while his knowledge is extensive in some subjects, it’s limited in others. His hallmark would be his extraordinary insight based on strong intuition—is the

assessment Theresia made of him.

It's hard to believe the boy could achieve a perfect score.

In which case, there must be some sort of foul play at work...

Unfortunately, there's no proof.

The test questions were stored under scrutinized security. The multi-layered barriers cast to prevent cheating didn't detect any suspicious activity.

However, there is one individual connected to Haruto who could easily transcend such obstacles.

Shiva, the Black Knight...

She doesn't know who he is or what his objective is.

His abilities seem to surpass not just the Flash Princess's, but even the great sage Granfelt's.

Not only is her suspicion based on nothing more than a conjecture, but she also hasn't the slightest idea of why he might be aiding Haruto.

How would it benefit Shiva for Haruto to be exempt from his studies? Or is he indebted to the boy, somehow?

There's no way she can answer those questions now.

All I can do is keep a watchful eye on him...

Generally, her policy is to conduct a thorough investigation if she suspects foul play.

From what she's glimpsed of his class performance, Haruto seems to be a typical slacker.

She believes beyond a shadow of a doubt that her duty as an educator is to guide such students towards the correct path.

However...

I never thought I'd encounter another student who eludes my control

as much as she did...

Haruto is likely of the same ilk. If so, Theresia is best off leaving him in the care of someone with a similar mentality.

Disciplining with orthodox principles may risk quashing the potential of a free-spirited genius.

Tearietta... She just might be able to...

Her musings are interrupted by a forceful knock at the door.

An emergency? No—just a rude visitor.

When the woman answers...

“Heya, Headmistress! Here I am—what? What’s so funny?”

Theresia can’t help giggling at the sight of the person she was just thinking about.

“Please excuse me. I mean no offense.”

“It’s fine,” Tearietta Luseiannel stands by the door with a saucy grin. “More importantly, do you have the results for the written test?”

“Yes. Perfect scores on every subject.”

“Oh, really! How impressive. Haruto himself said something about the questions being quite hard, and that he wasn’t confident in his answers.”

The headmistress can’t take this at face value.

Tearietta doesn’t look terribly surprised. If anything, she’s puffing out her chest as if she expected nothing less.

“You look dissatisfied,” the little professor remarks. “You don’t suspect Haruto of cheating, do you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“You got proof, then?”

“No, I do not.”

“Ha-hah. Then I suppose you can’t object, can you?”

“Correct. And based on your attitude right now, I see there’s no use pressing you. I do have some uncertainty about his academic abilities, but I will not challenge him any further. I intend to report nothing but the unembellished results to the House of Lords.”

“Hmph. A rather surprising reaction from you. And what if the House of Lords voice objections?”

“I will pacify them, of course,” Theresia states in earnest.

“Headmistress, you...changed.”

“I haven’t changed. I admit that the decision goes against my principles. But this is not the first time.”

“Huh. So, you dealt with a rascal like Haruto in the past? I wonder who.”

It was you. But the headmistress keeps it to herself.

“Welp. I came prepared for an argument like in the old days, but I seem to have been wrong.”

“I would quite enjoy a debate with you myself, but we’ll have to wait for another opportunity.”

“Err, I’d rather let sleeping dogs lie if I can help it...”

Tearietta adjusts her glasses as if to move on. “While I’m here... May I ask the status of the request I made?”

“At the moment, all is going well. It is quite the exceptional case, but given the girl’s strong motivation and remarkable talent, the majority of the votes are supportive. The main issue will be...”

Two faces appear in Theresia’s mind.

“...convincing her parents.”

“According to the girl,” the professor explains, “her mother is ‘super supportive’ and that ‘it’s only a matter of time’ before her father comes around.”

“Then I suppose I can give it my okay.”

Oh, good! Tearietta smiles brightly before she starts again. “All right, then. Let us move on to the other topic on the agenda—come on, you can’t hide forever. Come on out.”

A little girl peers out from behind Tearietta.

Her white hair and brown skintone are unusual in this kingdom. Her red eyes are focused intently on Theresia.

“So this is Mel, the child they brought back from the dungeon?” asks Theresia.

“Yes. But...I’ve never seen her like this before. Don’t look so frightened; this lady isn’t going to eat you.”

The little girl glares at the smiling headmistress with blatant hostility.

“She’s already shaken up from losing her memory, and now she’s being summoned to this meeting out of the blue. It’s not surprising that she’s guarded.”

“I suppose that’s true. But can you still do the treatment in this state?”

Tearietta has explained to Mel that she was brought here for psychiatric treatment.

“You’re well aware that I have the expertise. I’ve encountered similar cases before. There’s no need to worry.”

“There you go, Mel. You haven’t wanted much to do with me until now, so don’t start clinging all of a sudden. Go on, sit down,” the professor urges.

She frees herself of the child’s grip and sits her down on the sofa. “See ya later!” Tearietta waves as she leaves.

In the heavy silence that follows, Theresia rises and slowly walks towards the girl.

“So, it is you, Melcuemenes.”

At those words, Mel, or Melcuemenes, grits her teeth.

Theresia eyes her with pleasure.

“The pure-blooded servant of the Devil Lord Lucifyra has certainly taken on a sweet little appearance. Did you use up your mana somewhere?”

“Who are you? That mana of yours... You’re...*not human*.”

“Your threat-detection abilities are impressive. I suppose that’s to be expected of a devil designed for survival.”

“Do not evade the subject. How do you know me?”

“Oh, I know you. But there’s no need for me to tell you anything.”

Theresia pets Melcuemenes’s white hair and gently strokes her cheeks.

“You’ve been through some terrifying events, haven’t you? There’s much I’d like to ask but you wouldn’t be able to answer, as you’re a pure-blooded servant of the Devil Lord. I’m afraid if I force you to, you might ‘break’ altogether.”

Theresia's irises glow red.

“And if that happens, I may evoke the suspicion of a certain someone: the mysterious man Shiva. And so...”

“Ee...eek?!” Melcuemenes's face contorts in terror as she tries to escape.

But the woman clenches the little devil's shoulder and grabs her by the face.

“Forget everything. I pray you, from now on, will lead a peaceful life as an ordinary human girl.”

Melcuemenes's vision goes black.

In the darkness, she sees a wavering image of...her creator.



““““Cheers ♪””””

Back at the meeting room in Professor Tear's lab, the celebration has begun.

“Amazing as always, Brother Haruto! Getting perfect scores on all of your written exams!”

“Hahaha! I was in good shape that day.”

I went to bed early the night before and I was well-rested.

So yeah, I was in great shape for the written test.

It didn't matter what kind of security measures they took with my surveillance and communication magic, getting past the barriers that some Joe Shmoes set up was a piece of cake.

By the way, I didn't answer a single question myself.

There were some I thought I could handle, but I figured better safe than sorry.

Hmm? Liza seems exasperated. Yep, you did a great job. I'm grateful.

Afterwards, the headmistress went to report to the House of Lords and, lucky for me, I won my exemption from all of the classes.

Hooray!

Look how happy Char is, too.

“Tee-hee! Tee-hee-hee-hee ♪ Hahaha ♪ Yippee ♪”

Wait□she seems a little *too* happy.

“Char, did something good happen to you?”

“Yes! Not as important as your talents being recognized, Brother Haruto, but I did have something really wonderful happen for me personally, too!”

Something really wonderful for her personally? Don't tell me...

She has a boyfriend?!

No! No, no, nonono. No need to panic.

After all, Char's still a kid□an eleven-year-old.

On the other hand, this is an alternate universe. The rules of contemporary Japan don't apply to this civilization. Back in feudal Japan, young girls were married off for political strategy reasons, right?

“Um... What's the good news?” I ask apprehensively.

“I'm sorry, Brother Haruto. I'm afraid I can't tell you yet.”

Is she waiting for the right time to introduce him?!

No way...

It was practically just yesterday when she'd say stuff like, “Consider me for your number-two wife.”

Who is he? Who's messing with Char?!

She hardly ever meets new people.

Oh! Could it be Laius?! That slime! Pretending he's reformed while all this time he was getting close to me just to take advantage of Char. He'll pay for this!

But wait. I can't be so sure it's him.

Char's been hanging around the academy lately—maybe someone hit on her?!

There are guys like that at school here too—sleazebags and party guys and such.

Tsk. I was keeping my distance and doing my best not to interact with the type, but maybe that strategy bit me in the butt.

“What's the matter, Brother Haruto? Your face looks...scary...”

Oh. Whoops.

I was losing my cool and the thought of some guy stealing Char got me wound up.

Right. A big brother's job is to wish nothing but the best for his little sister.

“It's nothing, Char. Whatever makes you happy.”

“Yes, I am happy ♪”

In any case, if some dude wants to be her boyfriend, he's gonna have to beat her big brother first, right? That's the universal law—in any world.

Of course, I have no intention of a fair fight, man to man. He'll have to make it alive out of my ambush attacks.

Before she introduces him, I should track him down and jump him at night.

“By the way, Haruto, didn't you invite Iris?”

It's just me, Char, and Professor Tear right now. Plus Liza and Flay, who are serving the food while they eat it, too.

“I think she's coming later. She's at the headmistress's office again.”

“Again?” exclaims the professor. “I thought the whole pseudo-sacred weapon debate was settled on the agreement that Iris holds on to it. Did the House of Lords raise objections or something?”

“Who knows.”

“Sorry for being late!”

Speak of the whatever.

Iris is here. And she’s leading someone by the hand...

“Oh! Mel, you’re back too.”

It’s the mysterious lost girl, Mel with the white hair, dark skin, and her most charming feature: her red eyes.

Apparently, she was kidnapped by a devil but doesn’t seem to remember anything. She hasn’t really opened up to any of us.

So the professor left her with the headmistress for psychiatric treatment.

“...”

Mel looks around the room nervously. She locks eyes with mine.

“Mama!”

She runs over and hugs me. *Mama...?*

“What a surprise. I didn’t realize Mel was your long-lost daughter, Brother Haruto!”

“I didn’t either.”

Well, this is a shocking development.

But something doesn’t make sense. My procreating experience—in my past life and in the present one—is zero. Besides, how could I possibly become a “mama”?

“That’s not what’s going on here, Haruto,” Iris retorts knowingly.

Before she can explain, Professor Tear connects the dots.

“It looks like the headmistress opted to treat her by making her *forget*, rather than making her *remember*.”

“I see... I don’t understand.”

“She decided that the child was better off never recollecting the traumatic experiences she went through. If you ask me, it’s a bad move. It means that the knowledge of whatever truth this child’s privy to has now been lost.”

So, the headmistress used some kind of hypnotherapy to seal up Mel’s memory?

I don’t feel qualified to judge the ethics of that choice, but more importantly...

“How does that make me her mama?”

Enlighten me, puriizu.

“First of all, conveniently erasing her painful memories is a difficult task. It’s more likely that the child remembers next to nothing about her life before meeting us.”

“Uh-huh?”

“Nonetheless, we all have things we’re absolutely unwilling to let go of. For Mel, perhaps that’s the concept of a mother. But unfortunately, her mother isn’t here, and we have no clue who or where she might be.”

What does she do, then?

“In the process of reconciling her deep longing for her mother and the unfortunate reality of her situation, she must’ve connected you, Haruto, to the concept of a mother. After all, you were the one who rescued her.”

Iris adds, “The headmistress’s hypothesis is the same as what Professor Tear just said. She also presumes that Mel’s confusion in Haruto being her mother should wane to a certain degree, though it may take time.”

The human mind is a mysterious thing.

“I see what’s going on, but what do I do now?”

Mel is clinging to me and refuses to leave my side.

“You’ll just have to take care of her, obviously.”

Whaaat?! I groan internally but say nothing out loud. Not in front of my little sister.

“All right, then. Flay and Liza, please care for her as if you’re caring for me.”

“Gladly, Sir Haruto. My master’s daughter is my master,” Flay says ceremoniously.

“I’ve never reared a child before, but I’ll do my best,” promises Liza.

Were you two listening? She’s not my actual child, okay?

“There you go,” I say to Mel. “I’ll find your mom eventually. For now, go ahead and make yourself at home.”

I pat her white hair and she looks up at me with her red eyes. “Okay. Thank you, Mama.”

For the first time, a smile blossoms on the little girl’s face. *There’s no way we’re on the same page.*

In any case, Operation: Be a Shut-in at the Academy is a success. I think this is the first time one of my missions ended in victory.

Now I can be a hermit for the next two years or so at the academy, and then spend the rest of my days footloose and fancy-free at my own personal paradise—the hermitage.

My future is bright.

I find myself grinning.

“Tee-hee ♪ Tee-hee-hee ♪”

See? My little sister’s thrilled about my new beginning, too.

Yup. That’s right. I’ve got to hurry and track down whoever this boyfriend is and tear him a new one, rather, have a heart-to-heart with him.

With a new goal established, I prepare for the upcoming challenge...

AFTERWORD

Hello. I'm 澄守彩 (Sumimori Sai). Also known as すみもりさい (Sumimori Sai).

With the support of my fans, I'm able to present volume four. It really is thanks to you, the readers. I am floored. My sincerest appreciation!

In this volume, the main storyline is "Haruto tries to become a shut-in at school," which seems like a pretty weird idea.

Like, what's he talking about? Even I, the writer, was baffled as the story progressed. That doesn't bode well.

Setting that aside, his little sister Charlotte is as cute as ever. (I think.)

With the protagonist being in a school setting for the most part, I was worried there wouldn't be a lot of opportunities for Flay and the others to make an appearance.

But not to worry; they play big roles!

Between this and that, Haruto and Char get their moments to shine at school.

Just like the previous volumes, I've added bonus episodes between the chapters. Hope you enjoy those, too.

The manga version that's being published in Nico Nico Seiga's magazine, *Wednesday's Sirius*, is as popular as ever.

Volume four of the manga was released not long ago, so it might be fun to read it and compare how the stories line up.

Lastly, some words of thanks.

To Ai Takahashi, who did the illustrations for the light novels and

the manga series. Somehow, you manage to breathe life into my half-baked ideas even more vividly than I dream them up, and I'm deeply grateful! I'm sorry I make your job so hard... I look forward to our continued collaboration.

To all the editors at K Ranobe Books, and to my editor, Kurita-san. I'm sorry everything was so late this time. (Or again?) I'll try my best to do better next time.

And finally, I want to thank you, the readers, from the bottom of my heart. Your support for the light novel and manga is what makes it possible for me to continue. Thank you so much!

Whether or not you read the web version, I hope very much that you enjoy this book.

Sai Sumimori

